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Volume 2, No. 254 © SS 2004 MIDEAST EDITION

MONDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2004

Car bombings in Najaf, Karbala kill at least 62



A gunman, left, kills a man lying in Baghdad's Haifa Street after the victim was pulled from a car Sunday. The man and two others, including the man at right on his knees, all employees of the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq, were killed in an ambush. About 30 militants hurling hand grenades and firing machine guns attacked a car carrying the workers, who were dragged into the street and executed. Two others in the car escaped unhurt.

AP

Iraqi election workers gunned down in Baghdad street

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News Tracker ... What's new with old news

States

Gay marriage controversy: Social Security Administration officials have begun to reject marriage documents from New Paltz, N.Y., that were issued after Feb. 27, when the village's mayor, Jason West, started performing wedding ceremonies for gay couples.

The policy is part of a document called "Evidence of Identity for an SSN Card," which dictates what documents can be used to obtain a Social Security Card. But the agency stopped recognizing marriage certificates in New Paltz that purpose after the February date. The agency says in the policy that the legality of the documents is "unresolved at the state level."

Eric Rudolph trial: A federal judge has ruled that investigators properly seized evidence from bombing suspect Eric Rudolph's trailer and shed in North Carolina, making it admissible at trial.

Rudolph's attorneys had argued that federal agents improperly seized items such as books, a sales receipt, \$1,600 in cash, two daggers, bayonets and pistols, which were not within the scope of the search warrants.

But prosecutors said Rudolph had abandoned his property to go into hiding in the North Carolina wilderness after he was linked to the 1998 bombing of a Birmingham, Ala., abortion clinic that killed an off-duty police officer and injured a nurse.

Pauline Gore funeral: Former Vice President Al Gore remembered his mother at her funeral Saturday as an inspiring role model for women who believed education was the "key to freedom in life."

"She wanted everyone to personally feel the excitement from knowledge that she had felt in her own life," Gore said of Pauline LaFon Gore, who died Wednesday at the age of 92.

"It was her deep conviction that education opens the door to a new way of understanding the world and provides the key to freedom in life."

More than 200 people attended the funeral at the United Methodist Church in Carthage, Tenn., a small town about 50 miles east of Nashville where the Gore family owns a farm.

Business

Anti-spamming lawsuit: A federal judge has awarded an Internet service provider more than \$1 billion in what is believed to be the largest judgment ever against spammers.

Robert Kramer, whose company provides e-mail service for about 5,000 subscribers in eastern Iowa, filed suit against 300 spammers after his inbound mail servers received up to 10 million spam e-mails a day in 2000, according to court documents.

U.S. District Judge Charles R. Wolfe filed default judgments Friday against three of the defendants under the Federal Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act and the Iowa Ongoing Criminal Conduct Act.

World

North Korea sanctions: Japan's foreign minister warned North Korea on Sunday to recognize that it is running out of time to halt its nuclear weapons programs before Tokyo and its allies decide to impose economic sanctions on the isolated communist state.

At a summit meeting in southern Japan Friday, Japan's prime minister promised South Korea's president that Tokyo would hold off imposing economic sanctions on North Korea for now. North Korea said last week it would treat sanctions as a "declaration of war."

But Foreign Minister Nobutaka Machimura said Pyongyang wasn't off the hook yet.



Palestinian presidential election: International European Observers for the Palestinian Authority presidential election leave the Grand Park Hotel Sunday in the West Bank town of Ramallah, heading into various Palestinian cities. Forty-two long-term observers from the European Union Election Observation Mission to the West Bank and Gaza have arrived in Ramallah for the forthcoming Palestinian Authority presidential election.

"North Korea needs to recognize that it doesn't have much time left," Machimura said during a talk show aired by public broadcaster NHK, adding, "As for setting a specific date as the deadline, we're still considering whether to declare one."

Manila peace talks: Communist guerrillas said Sunday they were unlikely to resume peace talks with Manila and doubted the sincerity of a government-declared Christmas cease-fire, urging comrades to remain on guard against attacks.

Norwegian-brokered talks to end the communist rebellion, one of Asia's longest-running Marxist insurrections, were suspended in August after rebel negotiators protested the government's failure to pressure Washington and the European Union to remove them from terrorist blacklists.

The National Democratic Front, the Marxist umbrella group representing the guerrillas in the talks, said in a statement that the rebels wanted to return to the negotiating table but that prospects for the resumption of talks were dim. The statement blamed the government and the United States for using the terrorist label to try to force them to agree to terms tantamount to a surrender.

Palestinian prisoners: Israel on Sunday approved the release of 170 Palestinian prisoners in a goodwill gesture toward Egypt and the new Palestinian leadership, officials said, but a Palestinian official dismissed the Israeli move as "cosmetic."

News of the prisoner release came hours after Israel ended a two-day military operation in the southern Gaza Strip, leaving dozens of Palestinian homes in rubble.

The prisoner release, which comes ahead of the Jan. 9 Palestinian presidential election, was part of a deal with Egypt this month that brought home an Israeli jailed by Cairo on espionage charges.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon called Sunday's decision by a ministerial committee a "goodwill gesture" and spoke of "deep friendship" for Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

Australia Embassy attack: The Muslim militants accused of bombing Australia's Embassy in Indonesia stopped to pray at a mosque next to a government ministry moments before they carried out the attack, police revealed Sunday.

The disclosure came during a police reconstruction of the group's alleged movements about the Sept. 9 blast, which killed 10 people, one of them apparently a

suicide bomber, and injured more than 100.

It came days after foreign governments warned that Islamic militants were planning more attacks on Western targets in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim country.

Haiti government standoff: In a move applying both force and appeasement, officials of the beleaguered interim government said Saturday that they had ended an armed standoff with soldiers of the disbanded Haitian army by promising them back wages and jobs in exchange for their weapons.

While more radical elements of the demobilized army remained at large, the government of interim Prime Minister Gerard Latortue and the head of U.N. peacekeeping forces cast the bloodless settlement of the latest security crisis as a resolute display of commitment to disarm any faction menacing public order.

Fighting in Sudan: Sudan's government kept up attacks on rebels in Darfur, defying a deadline set by African Union mediators for an end to active hostilities, AU officials said.

AU mediators at peace talks being held in the Nigerian capital, Abuja, gave Sudan and rebel delegates a 24-hour ultimatum Friday to stop fighting by 6 p.m. Saturday or face possible referral to the U.N. Security Council.

AU officials said the government continued attacks.

AU spokesman Assane Ba told reporters government helicopters were attacking the town of Labado. But Sudan's government claimed it was defending against an insurgent offensive.

War on terrorism

Gitmo tribunals: Two prisoners with alleged ties to the al-Qaida terrorist network appeared Saturday before a U.S. military review tribunal in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

One detainee, whose age was unknown, was accused of shooting an Afghan militiaman and two civilians in 2003, said Navy Lt. Gary Ross, a spokesman for the Combatant Status Review Tribunals. Afghan militiamen captured the detainee a year ago after a shootout and grenade battle, Ross said.

Regional and factional militias helped the United States rout the Taliban in late 2001. The militias are being disarmed under a U.N.-sponsored peace plan, and the United States and its allies are training a new Afghan army.

Stories and photo from wire services

At least 62 killed in suicide car bombings

Blasts hit Najaf, Karbala an hour apart; in Baghdad, 3 election workers executed in street

BY ABDUL HUSSEIN
AL-OBEIDI

The Associated Press

NAJAF, Iraq — Car bombs exploded Sunday at a Najaf funeral procession and Karbala's main bus station, killing at least 62 people and wounding more than 120 in apparently coordinated attacks in Iraq's holiest Shiite cities. Dozens of gunmen roamed a main street in downtown Baghdad, killing three Iraqi election workers in a vicious attack designed to disrupt next month's parliamentary ballot.

The deadly strikes highlighted the apparent ability of the insurgents to launch attacks almost at will, striking in the heart of Baghdad and in numerous other cities despite confident assessments by U.S. military commanders that they had regained the initiative after last month's campaign against militants in Fallujah.

The bombings in Najaf and Karbala, predominantly Shiite cities 45 miles from each other south of Baghdad, came just over an hour apart. The first was a suicide blast that ripped through minibuses at an entrance to Karbala's main bus station, followed by a car bomb in a central Najaf square crowded with people watching a funeral procession arrive. The attacks were the chief and provincial governor.

"There's no doubt that there's a strong link between these two incidents," said Jalal Eddin al-Sagheer, an official with the leading Shiite political party, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution.

"These operations aim at provoking the Shiites away from the political process and toward acts of revenge to undermine the national unity," he added. "The whole issue has to do with elections."

Youssef Munim, an official at Najaf's al-Hakim Hospital, said 47 people were killed and 69 wounded. Two more dead and 21 other wounded were taken to the nearby al-Zahra Hospital, according to nurse Mohammad Abdi Redha.

The car bomb detonated in Na-



An image of the aftermath following a suicide car bomber detonated his vehicle outside Karbala's main bus station on Sunday. The blast killed at least 13 people, according to hospital officials. An hour later, a car bomb shattered a central square in Najaf, crowded with residents watching a funeral procession, killing at least 49 people. More than 120 others were wounded in both attacks.

jaf's central Maidan Square where a large crowd of people had gathered for the funeral procession of a tribal sheik — about 100 yards from where Gov. Adnan al-Zurufi and police chief Ghalib al-Jazari were standing.

"A car bomb exploded near us," al-Zurufi said. "I saw about 10 people killed."

Al-Jazari believed he and al-Zurufi were the targets of the attack, in which he said three blasts were heard at about 2:45 p.m. Both men were unhurt.

"As 1 and the governor were waiting for the funeral processions three explosions occurred," al-Jazari said. "We were targeted."

It was not immediately clear what the other explosions were from.

Residents were pulling bodies of the dead from damaged shops at the square, which is about 400

yards from the Imam Ali Shrine, the holiest Shiite site in Iraq.

The Karbala blast destroyed about 10 passenger minibuses and set ablaze five cars outside the crowded Bab Baghdad bus station.

Firefighters tried to put out the fires as ambulances ferried burned and bleeding casualties to the nearby al-Hussein hospital.

Hospital official Ali al-Ardawi said 13 people were killed and 33 injured.

It was Karbala's second bombing in a week. On Wednesday, a bomb exploded at the city's gold-domed Imam Hussein Shrine, killing eight people and wounding 40 in an apparent attempt to kill a top aide to Iraq's most powerful Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

The shrine, located near the bus station, was hit on March 2 by a suicide bombing that killed 85

people and wounded 100. The holy sites in Najaf and Karbala, south of Baghdad, house the tombs of Shia Islam's most revered saints.

The violence was the latest in an insurgent campaign to disrupt the crucial elections, the first national polls since Saddam Hussein's fall — and the latest to target Shiite Muslims, Iraq's majority community that will most likely to dominate the vote.

In Baghdad, about 30 armed insurgents, hurling hand grenades and firing guns, ambushed a car carrying five election officials — executing three — during the morning rush-hour on central Haifa Street, the scene of repeated clashes between U.S. forces and insurgents.

Three officials of the nongovernmental Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq were dragged from their car, which

was later set alight. Two escaped unharm.

Pistol-wielding gunmen — their faces uncovered — forced the officials to kneel in the middle of Haifa Street, while the traffic behind them on the thoroughfare braked to a halt and panicked drivers tried to reverse away from the ambush site. One of the officials was punched by the gunmen as he lay on the ground, before the militants shot all three at point-blank range.

The commission condemned the attack as a "terrorist ambush."

"The UECI urges the Iraqi people and all its political, religious, and social leaders, and the authorities to condemn this inhuman crime, which has brought shame on our people and country," the commission said.

A police official said the ferocity of the clashes prevented police from securing the area. The attackers, most of whom were seen brazenly roaming Haifa Street without anything covering their faces, later set fire to at least one other vehicle before melting away as U.S. and Iraqi National Guard forces cordoned off the area.

Sunni elder statesman Adnan Pachachi, who heads a field of 70 candidates into the Jan. 30 elections, said the Haifa Street violence proved there should be a "short postponement" of the national polls to address the concerns of senior Sunni clerics demanding a boycott.

Among the militants fanning the insurgency are many Islamic extremists, believed to be mainly Sunnis, who have lost prestige and privilege since their former sponsor, fellow Sunni Saddam Hussein, was toppled.

Interim Iraqi Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, a pro-American secular Shiite, said an increase in attacks ahead of the elections had been anticipated.

"For sure we expect strikes and we hope the eyes of our people will be open to inform authorities and help them in doing their job," told al-Iraqiya TV.

Associated Press Writers Mariam Far and Samir Nasser in Baghdad and Gassid Jabbar in Karbala contributed to this report.

Militants claim to have kidnapped 10 Iraqis with U.S. security company

The Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Insurgents claiming to represent three Iraqi militant groups released a videotape Saturday saying they had captured 10 Iraqis working for an American security and reconstruction company and would kill them if their firm did not leave this turbulent country.

The groups, claiming to be the Mujahideen Army, the Black Banner Brigade and the Mutassim Bellah Brigade, also threatened more attacks on Iraqi operations of the company, Washington, D.C.-headquartered Sandi Group, and anyone who cooperated with it.

Mutassim Bellah was an ancient Iraqi military commander.

"We warn the director of (Sandi Group) ... to close the company completely and all its branches and to leave Iraq, otherwise those (hostages) who are in our grasp will be killed," a masked militant wearing a traditional black Arab robe said in comments recorded on the tape obtained by Associated Press Television News.

The tape, which could not be immediately verified, showed at least four insurgents with their faces covered by traditional Arab head scarves and posing with machine guns.

Chad Knauss, an American and deputy chief operations officer of Sandi Group in Iraq, declined to comment on claims that his company's employees had been kidnapped.

U.S. deaths in Iraq

The Associated Press

As of Saturday, at least 1,304 members of the U.S. military have died since the beginning of the Iraq war in March 2003, according to an Associated Press count. At least 1,021 died as a result of hostile action, the Defense Department said.

The figures include three military civilians.

The AP count is four higher than the Defense Department's tally, last updated at 11:30 a.m. EST Friday.

The British military has reported 74 deaths; Italy, 19; Poland, 13; Spain, 11; Ukraine, nine; Bulgaria, seven; Slovakia, three; Estonia, Thailand and the Netherlands, two each; and Denmark, El Salvador, Hungary and Latvia one death each.

Since May 1, 2003, when President Bush declared that major combat operations in Iraq had ended, 1,166 U.S. military members have died, according to AP's count. That includes at least 912 deaths resulting from hostile action, according to the military's numbers.

The latest deaths reported by the military:

■ No new deaths reported.

The latest identifications reported by the military:

■ Marine Lance Cpl. Franklin A. Sweger, 24, San Antonio, killed Thursday in Iraq's Anbar province; assigned to 1st Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment, 3rd Marine Division, III Marine Expeditionary Force, Marine Corps Base, Hawaii.

Iraqis at the gate



A member of the Iraqi National Guard searches an Iraqi worker entering Logistics Support Area Anaconda, Iraq, on Thursday. About 1,000 Iraqis work on the base. The job of checking them falls to the 181st Support Battalion and members of the Iraqi National Guard.

PHOTOS BY RON JENSEN
Stars and Stripes

“If we have any question about an Iraqi person, we send them home. We don’t take any chances.”

Sgt. Douglas Peterson

Soldiers keep wary eye on workers passing through Anaconda’s checkpoint

BY RON JENSEN

Stars & Stripes

LOGISTICS SUPPORT AREA ANACONDA, Iraq — Every day hundreds of Iraqis flow through the gates at Logistics Support Area Anaconda.

They are either people with jobs on base or people who want work, if even for a few hours. Still more come with big trucks to deliver goods to America’s largest supply hub in Iraq.

No matter how familiar the faces or how harmless they may look, soldiers of the 181st Support Battalion, part of the 81st Brigade Combat Team, consider each a possible threat.

“If we have any question about an Iraqi person, we send them home,” said Sgt. Douglas Peterson. “We don’t take any chances.”

Each day, usually between 8 and 10 a.m., about 1,000 Iraqis walk through the base’s north gate. They are searched and their identification scrutinized numerous times.

Peterson, a carpenter back in Washington state, watches every day as people file past him to be searched by Iraqi National Guard soldiers. His eyes peeled for bulky coats that might hide explosives, he said, or a person who wants to be searched only by a particular individual.

Iraqis often carry guns, he said, and sometimes one will forget to leave it at the check-in point for weapons.

“We don’t take that lightly here,” he said. “We look and load.”

Alcohol, electronic gear and knives are a few of the contraband not allowed on the base. The Iraqi soldiers pat down their countrymen from head to toe, checking their coat pockets



Sgt. Justin Jones of Company D, 181st Support Battalion, 81st Brigade Combat Team checks an Iraqi worker.

and even looking inside packs of cigarettes.

“Everyone’s checked,” said 1st Lt. Annmarie Stormo, so it may take around 45 minutes for an Iraqi to maneuver through the maze of checkpoints and holding areas.

At the end of the day, the process is repeated. Everyone leaving the base is searched.

Capt. Stan Seo said the soldiers look for computers, documents and even soldiers’ mail.

After the morning’s initial check, the base visitors are segregated. The permanent workers with red badges go to one line where they are checked again before entering.

Those hoping for work are put in an area where they wait for a job that may or may not appear.



A sign at the north gate of Logistics Support Area Anaconda, Iraq, tells anyone entering which items they can’t bring onto the base.

If units on base need a building painted or a fence repaired, they can come and choose from the

waiting crowd.

“Every day I come here, but no work,” one man in the hold-

ing area said in English. “My father, sick.”

Staff Sgt. Larry Larson, who is a health technician for the military in Spokane, Wash., said he feels sorry for the Iraqis who come looking for work. Some, he said, have worked for units that have left Iraq, so he’s tried to hook them up with the replacement.

“I feel for them,” he said. “I wish there was more I could do for them.”

The individuals have not caused many problems for the soldiers of the 81st BCT, which is a National Guard unit from Washington state.

Vehicle traffic, on the other hand, has sometimes stiffened the soldiers’ backs when a bomb is found on a truck.

“We’ve had quite a few, enough to check everyone on their toes,” said Seo.

Stormo said bombs are usually placed on the trucks without the driver’s knowledge. Recently, a truck rolled toward the gate with a bomb on its gas tank, but it was discovered before it got close.

“I call it probing,” said Stormo. “They’re trying to see how far they can get before we detect it.” Truckers sometimes find the bombs and tell the soldiers. Bomb-sniffing dogs are also used to check vehicle traffic.

Bombs aren’t the only thing on the checklist. Sgt. David Medzyk said he is looking for anything on the contraband list, which he finds “pretty often.”

At the gates, the soldiers know there is never a time they can let their guard down.

“We’re the last check. If we miss it, it’s on the post somewhere,” Medzyk said. “And we haven’t missed yet.”

E-mail Ron Jensen at: jensen@mail.strips.esd.mil

IRR members learn to be soldiers again

BY ELLIOTT MINOR

The Associated Press

FORT BENNING, Ga. — Eighteen months after he was honorably discharged from the Army, Angel Pimentel reached into his mailbox and opened a startling letter, an order from Uncle Sam to become a soldier again.

So now the New York City police officer who walked a beat in Brooklyn is Pfc. Pimentel again, ready to resume his military job as a generator mechanic wherever the Army decides to send him.

Pimentel, 23, was a member of the Individual Ready Reserve, or IRR — soldiers who were honorably discharged after active-duty tours of four to six years. They are assigned to the IRR to complete the remainder of their eight-year military obligation.

Unlike the National Guard and Reserve, IRR members don't have to attend weekend drills, but they can be called back at any time.

Nearly 20,000 were mobilized in 1990 for the first Persian Gulf War, and Army officials decided they are needed again to ease manpower shortages brought on by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Since July 6, the Army has sent mobilization letters to 4,166 IRR soldiers, which ordered more than half to report for duty in the fall. The others will report after the Christmas holidays.

Pimentel is among a group of about 30 who were assigned to Fort Benning, one of four Army posts responsible for training them. Fort Benning has had up to 60 at a time, but they've moved on and no more are expected until after the holidays.

Guided by drill sergeants — themselves Army reservists who have been mobilized for at least a year — the returnees are learning how to do things the Army way, again. They sleep in barracks, eat Army chow, march to the cadence of drill sergeants and shape up with push-ups, sit-ups and two-mile runs.

On Fort Benning's ranges, they get reacquainted with one of the Army's two basic weapons, the M-16 rifles carried by enlisted soldiers or the 9 mm pistols issued to officers. They attend classes to learn about new weapons.

Like other soldiers heading for the war zones, they practice urban warfare techniques in faux villages and receive special training to help them avoid the improvised bombs that have become a major threat in Iraq.

During a recent class on search and seizure, the soldiers learned how to secure a detainee's wrists with nylon cuffs and they took turns wrestling each other to the ground.



As others trainees practice and drill sergeants look on, Pfc. Ryan Lee of Coventry, R.I., left foreground, secures the hands of Pfc. Angel Pimentel of New York during training at Fort Benning, Ga., on Dec. 7. Lee and Pimentel are among more than 4,000 members of the Individual Ready Reserve the Army is attempting to call back to overcome manpower shortages created by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

For the rough and tumble exercise, Pimentel was paired with Pfc. Ryan Lee, 23, of Coventry, R.I., also a generator mechanic.

"I was shocked at first, but it was my duty to come here," said Lee, who had started a civilian career. "I'm going to do the best I can."

At one point, Sgt. 1st Class Christina Burgess, 38, was pinned to the ground by two soldiers almost young enough to be her sons.

"This training will help me save myself or others," said Burgess, a Slidell, La., real estate agent, who left her husband and three teenage children to return as an Army administrative specialist.

"I enjoyed the Army very much," she said. "There were a lot of things I missed, the regimen and camaraderie, and I'm glad to be back. Of course, I miss the Cajun cooking."

Besides Fort Benning, the IRR soldiers train at Fort Jackson, S.C., Fort Leavenworth, Kan., and Fort Sill, Okla.

"The attitude as a whole is very positive about why they are here," said Capt. Ronnie DeWeese, a certified public accountant from Muncie, Ind., who is responsible for Benning's IRR training.

"As a whole, they're very proud to be here supporting the mission."

However, some soldiers have been resistant to returning to the uniform. Of the 2,288 IRRs nationwide ordered to report to duty by Oct. 17, 628 have not responded, said Lt. Col. Pamela Hart, an Army spokeswoman at the Pentagon.

"There may be various reasons why they haven't shown up," she said. "We may have the wrong address. We're doing everything we can to work with individual sol-

diers to provide them every opportunity to comply with their call to active duty."

Sgt. 1st Class Jerry Tennant, 47, had been out of the military for nine years, but said he's fit enough to keep up with the younger soldiers like Lee and Pimentel.

"It's an experience to come back and do it again," said Tennant, a postal worker from Fort Collins, Colo. "The training is fantastic."

Staff Sgt. Ross Schliephake, 41, said his wife opened his mobilization letter and immediately called him on his cell phone.

"She wasn't too happy," said Schliephake, a heavy equipment operator from Columbus, which adjoints Fort Benning.

Schliephake said he has maintained an enlistment in the IRR, even though he no longer had to.

"I never really wanted to leave the military completely," he said.



BEN MURRAY/Stars and Stripes

Italian Carabinieri members Antonio Altavilla, left, and Cosimo Visconti, center, visit with staff members at the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany on Thursday, a little more than a year after the soldiers were admitted to the hospital with critical injuries.

Carabinieri visit Landstuhl to thank American doctors

BY BEN MURRAY

Stars and Stripes

LANDSTUHL, Germany — When Italian Carabinieri member Antonio Altavilla came to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in November 2003, doctors had doubts that he would leave alive.

Critically wounded during a suicide bomb attack in Nasiriyah, Iraq, which killed 17 of his comrades, Altavilla's lungs and liver were badly injured, and he was bleeding internally.

"We thought at least three or four times that he wasn't going to make it," said Col. Tyler Putnam, Chief of General and Specialty Surgery at Landstuhl. "Literally for a month it was nip and tuck. [He had] the highest injury severity score you can have."

Likewise, Cosimo Visconti, another Carabinieri injured in the attack, could have spent the rest of his life in a wheelchair.

But Altavilla and Visconti both walked into Landstuhl with smiles on their faces Thursday in what hospital officials said was the first-ever return visit by foreign soldiers treated at the American facility.

The two Italians, fully recovered from their injuries, wanted to personally thank the doctors and "see the faces of the people who helped him," Altavilla said through an interpreter.

The two men walked through several wings of the hospital, shaking hands with staff members and meeting people from the intensive care unit, which treated them when they first arrived.

The visit was a rare opportunity for hospital staff to see the results of their work, Putnam said, because Landstuhl often acts as a way station for critical patients being moved to stateside hospitals.

"It's incredible," he said. "It's a great morale booster."

E-mail Ben Murray at: murrayb@mail.estripes.osd.mil

Records: Guardsman killed Iraqi after sex

The Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — A National Guardsman who pleaded guilty to killing a 17-year-old Iraqi soldier said he shot the young man after they had consensual sex in a guard tower, a newspaper reported Saturday, citing court-martial records.

Pvt. Federico Daniel Merida, 21, pleaded guilty to murder without premeditation and other

Details of private's court-martial published in paper

charges during a court-martial in Iraq in September.

Merida was sentenced Sept. 25 to 25 years in prison and reduced in rank and will be dishonorably discharged. He is being held at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., a Leavenworth spokeswoman said.

Merida, who was born in Veracruz, Mexico, has a wife and two

children.

Army officials at Forward Operating Base Danger, where the court-martial was held in Iraq, had previously withheld details of the case.

However, The News & Observer of Raleigh reported Saturday that records show Merida and the Iraqi were on guard duty May 11

in a tower on the perimeter of an Army camp near Tikrit in northern Iraq. At about 10:30 p.m., Merida shot the teen 11 times with his carbine.

Merida first told investigators the teen demanded money at gunpoint. Later, he said he killed the boy because he forced him to have sex. In a third interview,

Merida said he got angry after the two had consensual sex.

Merida also pleaded guilty to two counts of giving false statements.

Merida apologized to the victim's family during the court-martial, records show. "He was a son, a brother, someone very important to them," he said. "I took someone they loved and cared for."

Readjusting to life after war hard for some

BY RYAN LENZ

The Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine — After coming home from Iraq, Curtis Mills recalls driving his daughter to a recital and passing a comfortably familiar mountain near his Maine home, and panicking when he saw a radio tower's blinking red lights.

"For a second, I almost yelled out tracers at 11 o'clock!" Mills said sheepishly during a break from shoveling snow from his driveway in Shapleigh after a recent storm. "Then I realized it was just an antenna."

For the soldiers of the Army Reserve's 94th Military Police Company, which was deployed for a grueling 20 months, returning to cozy hometowns across New England has been a struggle with the unexpected. They say their lives have changed, and every day can carry nighttime reminders of their time at war.

Everyday sounds such as backfiring cars and slammed doors send them into panicked alert. They react by scanning rooftops for snipers or scouring the crowds around them for anything out of the ordinary.

"You don't get through a day without thinking about it. No matter what I do, there's always something," said Mills, a postal worker who was hospitalized for 11 months in Walter Reed Medical Center after surviving a roadside bomb that detonated beneath his Humvee near Ramadi.

The shift bears the dubious distinction of being one of the longest-deployed military reserve components since World War II, and the MPs are believed to be among the longest-deployed soldiers to Iraq.

Their homecoming has presented challenges for soldiers battling haunting memories of a country that became increasingly dangerous during their tour of duty.

"When you see certain things, Christmas lights, things we didn't have, you're so overwhelmed and you take a breath and say, 'Wow, you really are home,'" said Curtis Mawn, 35, a firefighter from Norwood, Mass.

Deployed in December 2002, about 160 soldiers were sent to Iraq four months later for a standard 365-day tour. Twice the soldiers were ready to leave



Curtis Mills, of Shapleigh, Maine, sits by a decorated Christmas tree at his home. Mills, a postal carrier, belongs to the Army Reserve's 94th Military Police company that is believed to have the distinction of being the longest deployed military reserve component since World War II. He returned home from Iraq after spending 11 months recovering from injuries he sustained from a roadside bomb.

when their deployment was extended; at Easter, they were hours away from boarding their flight home when the news they would stay was delivered.

The company of soldiers from Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Rhode Island returned in August from its deployment, the last months of which were in the dangerous Sunni Tri-

angles used cell phones to detonate roadside bombs, Stegeman said. It took him awhile to adjust.

"I still wake up sometimes thinking 'Am I really home, or is this all a dream?'" Stegeman said. "Even though we've been home for four months, sometimes it doesn't feel that I'm even here at all."

Heightened sensitivity, sleeplessness, and hair-trigger responsiveness to unexpected sounds and sights. These are all symptoms of combat stress, a condition with extensive history among soldiers re-acclimating to their lives' routines after living in a war, psychologists say.

"When you're in a war environment for a long period of time, that can affect you," said Capt. Bobby Sidell, a clinical psychologist at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y. "And if you're knee-deep in it, it's hard to kind of take that objective step back."

Common issues for combat veterans include hypersensitivity to

loud noises, fatigue and vivid dreams of those horrors they witnessed as bullets flew and roadside bombs exploded, Sidell said.

All of those symptoms can be compounded by the length of the 94th's deployment and the frustration that accompanied extensions that kept them in a combat theater longer than 365 days, Sidell said.

The military offers psychological services to combat veterans, but Sidell said often soldiers are unaware of their need for them when they return or get lost in the shuffle of finding services.

After spending 20 of the last 24 months on active duty, Scott Durst, 50, of Buxton, Maine, didn't take his uniform off until late in the night when he finally returned home to a small farm his family bought while he was away.

"It's taking a lot of soldiers time to feel like they're safe," said Durst, who's back on the job at the Maine Drug Enforcement Agency. "Sometimes you don't even feel that you were over there. But I want to think about it because it was such a dramatic time."

GI killed in Kuwait

KUWAIT CITY — One U.S. soldier was killed and three injured in a traffic accident outside Kuwait City on Sunday, the U.S. military said in a statement.

The statement said the "hit and run" accident happened in the morning, and the injured soldiers were admitted to a civilian hospital.

The names of the soldiers were withheld pending notification of next of kin, the statement said.

The U.S. military and Kuwaiti authorities were investigating.

American forces have been based in the country since the end of the 1991 U.S.-led Persian Gulf War that ended a seven-month Iraqi occupation.

In the past three years, American troops, and U.S. civilians contracted to the military, have been targeted by Islamic extremists who oppose their presence in Kuwait. One Marine and one civilian contractor have been killed in the attacks.

Iraqi policeman killed

BASRA, Iraq — Iraqi police said an officer has been killed during clashes between coalition forces and insurgents near the southern city of Basra, police said Sunday.

Lt. Col. Karim al-Zaidi said a police officer was shot dead Friday at 6 p.m. after being caught in the cross-fire between British soldiers and Iraqi insurgents during clashes in Zubayr, just west of Basra, Iraq's second-largest city, 340 miles southeast of Baghdad.

A British military spokesman, Squadron Leader Steve Dhamaraj, said an investigation is under way into an incident on the same day at the same time involving "a multinational convoy and a civilian vehicle."

Dhamaraj said he was aware of the killing of a policeman in the Basra area but did not know if he died as a result of the incident involving the coalition forces convoy.

Britain, America's closest ally in Iraq, has more than 9,000 soldiers in the country, mostly based in the south.

From The Associated Press

Insurgents target troops' efforts in Samarra

Car bombs, mines, militants continue to hamper rebuilding

BY JOSH WHITE

The Washington Post

SAMARRA, Iraq — Three dozen restless young boys waited in a line outside the cramped schoolhouse office, inching toward a grinning Health Ministry official administering measles shots. First Sgt. Dale Veneklasen, his pocket full of crisp \$20 bills, walked in to see what, if anything, the school needed in the way of help.

The school, teeming with students on a Saturday, showed the progress being made here, he said.

Within seconds, a hefty blast rocked the room, causing the brisk late morning air to surge. Screaming children scattered into a concrete breezeway, some still holding cotton balls against their arms. Teachers gasped and ran. Veneklasen and members of his Hellraisers platoon darted outside and into a nearby intersection where AK-47 fire erupted in a short burst amid lingering smoke.

Nearby, three U.S. troops were wounded in a rocket-propelled grenade attack as they toured the city's schools as part of a civil affairs mission. The strike apparently came from behind a dirt berm in the middle of one of Samarra's most tumultuous neighborhoods, a place where insurgents have launched several attacks in recent weeks.

Veneklasen ran to the wounded service-members, grabbing a stretcher from the grille of his Humvee as Spc. William Chavis, a medic, cut away one soldier's pant leg, revealing deep wounds around his knee. Chavis, 20, of McColl, S.C., quickly applied a tight bandage wrap and found a splint. His patient writhed in pain in the cold dirt a few feet from a hulking Bradley fighting vehicle.

Blood spurted between another soldier's fingers as he held his mouth, a piece of shrapnel lodged in his right jaw near his neck, his glasses covered in a bright red spray. A third soldier hopped slightly before falling to his knees, clutching a wound in his lower abdomen, below his body armor.

Veneklasen, 34, of Estelline, S.D., jumped back into his Humvee and slammed the door. "Somebody jumped up with an RPG and small arms fire. All because we're trying to help the damn schools out," he said. "Another beautiful day in Samarra."

The Hellraisers, part of the 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment's Apache Company, are on the front line of the continuing battle for this city, a swath of modest neighborhoods along the eastern bank of the Tigris River about 65 miles north of Baghdad. U.S. troops stormed into Samarra in the first days of October, taking the city of 220,000 away from a cluster of insurgents, but the level of their control is measured in small victories.



The Washington Post

First Sgt. Dale Veneklasen, 34, of Estelline, S.D., hands out snack cakes to children on the streets of Samarra, Iraq, about two hours after his unit came under attack by insurgents, who wounded three soldiers with a rocket-propelled grenade. A small band of insurgents has been consistently attacking U.S. forces as soldiers have been trying to facilitate civil projects in the city.

Schools that were empty and decrepit now have fresh paint and new bathrooms, and host hundreds of children who can barely contain their enthusiasm when soldiers come through to visit. Storefronts selling lamb, fresh fruit, furniture, rugs and water heaters are open for business. The streets are relatively clean, and a local public works project is cutting a new road through downtown. Laborers are busy working on construction projects.

But the attacks haven't stopped. Car bombs target U.S. servicemen at main intersections, mines are left on patrol routes, insurgents pop up and take pot shots.

The police force, which sputtered from the start, has completely disbanded, some of its weapons and body armor in the hands of insurgents. The City Council has not met in weeks. U.S. troops are hoping to use Iraqi National Guard and Interior Ministry forces to protect the elections scheduled in less than 45 days.

"Samarra was a baby Fallujah," said Col. Richard Longo, artillery commander for the 1st Infantry Division, which supervises operations in north-central Iraq from its headquarters in Tikrit. "We allowed for sanctuary there. The police lacked credibility. There are still some insurgents there, and there's a lot of work to be done."

Officers and senior enlisted soldiers in Samarra say conditions have improved

since Operation Baton Rouge largely cleared the city of insurgents in early October, a mission that in some ways mirrored the U.S. attack in Fallujah last month. But they estimate that between 80 and 100 insurgents still operate in the Samarra area, some of whom probably infiltrated the city after the battle in Fallujah.

"Samarra is one of the best-kept secrets in Iraq," Capt. Benjamin Marlin, Apache Company commander, said Friday, walking through the fine dust around the base that the soldiers call "moon dust," searching for the mortar impacts. "We've limited what they can do, but there is a lot of action. We can never completely stop it without the local Iraqi security forces. And we're at a complete intelligence standstill right now."

The morning attack was brief but effective, setting off a coordinated search of the neighborhood for the culprits. A Bradley fired three 25mm rounds in the direction of the RPG fire, but the shots missed their mark, sending up plumes of smoke and dust. The hunt was delayed so the three wounded soldiers could be transported to an aid station just west of the city.

"You're gonna be just fine, just fine brother," Veneklasen told the soldier with the injured knee, whose gashes revealed bone, telling him to squeeze his hand as medics dressed the wounds. The names of the injured are being withheld to allow for family notification.

Standing off to the side, Spc. Robert Johnson, 22, of Columbus, Ohio, watched as the soldier with the shrapnel in his jaw was treated.

"I'm alright," he muttered through a swollen face. All three soldiers were expected to fully recover.

The platoon immediately headed back into Samarra, hoping to find whatever they could about the shooters. They rolled into town, a little faster than before, and got out near the berm where they believed the shots originated. One neighbor, eager to help, described a white vehicle with two masked men that pulled up, then quickly attacked before fleeing. Another neighbor, Zaid Salman, a contractor who does work for the new Iraqi government, said his father heard a boom but didn't see anything.

Spc. Chad Merkle, 24, of Dixon, Calif., sat in the driver's seat of a Humvee while soldiers searched two homes suspected of harboring insurgents.

"It's sad that you get used to it," Merkle said about such attacks. "You feel good that they weren't hurt that bad, but it bothers you they got hurt at all and it angers you that we were out there trying to help the Iraqi people and got hit. It's going to be a while before we get all of them, but little by little, we're clearing things up. It's a better place than it was, but there's a long road ahead of us."

Two hours after the attacks, the Hellraisers were handing out candy to children on the city's streets, not far from the attack.

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Father apologizes for torching Marines' van

The Associated Press

HIALEAH, Fla. — A man has apologized for setting fire to the van driven by a team of Marines who had come to his house to tell him his son was killed in Iraq.

"Thank God they opened their hearts to see me," Carlos Arredondo said after a private meeting with the Marines on Saturday at a Marine base in Hialeah, a Miami suburb.

Arredondo was celebrating his 44th birthday at his home in Hollywood on Aug. 25 and had his phone in his pocket, expecting a call from his son, Marine Lance Cpl. Alexander Arredondo.

Man had been told his son was killed in Iraq

But then three Marines, members of a military Casualty Assistance Calls team, arrived and told him his 20-year-old son had been killed in combat in Najaf, Iraq, during his second tour of duty in Iraq.

"I couldn't believe they were saying that to me when I was waiting for my son to call," said Arredondo.

"I got very upset. I felt like it was a bad joke or bad dream," he said. "I was crying. ... I was calling for Alex."

Arredondo grabbed a propane torch and a gasoline can from his garage, yelled at

the Marines to leave, smashed a window of their van with a hammer, poured gasoline in the vehicle and climbed inside.

As his mother tried to pull him out, he said, he accidentally turned on the torch.

The Marines put out the flames on his body. Jackson Memorial Hospital has given him an extended payment plan to pay his \$43,000 bill for burns that covered 26 percent of his body.

On Saturday, Arredondo and his wife, Melinda, met with Marine Maj. Scott Mack and the three Marines who went to his

house. They discussed two scholarships in his son's name — one created by the Marines and the other by Blue Hills Regional Technical School in Canton, Mass., where the younger Arredondo graduated. As a personal penance, Arredondo has visited veterans in Boston hospitals.

After the howling meeting, everyone stepped outside, and Arredondo saluted and embraced the Marines.

"Whatever happened out there wasn't about them," he said afterward. "I wanted them to understand I am very, very sorry."

After the fire, Mack had said the Marines would not press charges "out of compassion and sensitivity" to Arredondo. The three Marines were not injured.

Cold weather perfect for battle anniversary

For Battle of the Bulge re-enactors, dressing up is their 'tribute' to vets

By KEVIN DOUGHERTY

Stars and Stripes

BASTOGNE, Belgium — Much like it did 60 years ago, the weather finally broke Sunday for those assembled in the Ardennes, allowing events to unfold according to script.

It may not have been as cold and as snowy as it was during the Battle of the Bulge, but the past couple of days have had an edge to them. On Sunday, the final day for commemorative ceremonies marking the historic battle, the skies parted and the sun surfaced just in time to allow 19 American re-enactors to parachute over the grounds of the Mardasson, the village's World War II memorial park.

"The jump was nice, a little windy though," said Jan Patronek, the first man to leap out of the vintage Dakota aircraft. "It was colder in the airplane than on the ground."

Up until the last hour, the noon-time jump was touch and go due to a low blanket of clouds. The weather in Belgium and Luxembourg over the past few days has been cold and windy. Coupled with the snow that fell Friday, conditions in the Ardennes region

are similar to what soldiers and their allies endured 60 years ago.

"We have to share the pleasures," cracked Stephan Hadjadj, a French re-enactor who watched the parachute jump.

The pleasure has been all Bastogne's.

Thousands of residents turned out Sunday night for an outdoor sound and light show, a show that yanked people back to the tenuous days of the war. Except for several searchlights scouring the heavens, all lights downtown were extinguished to heighten the effect. Pre-recorded sounds of gunfire and bombs echoed through the streets. The show ended with an impressive fireworks display.

In addition to the parachute jump, Sunday's itinerary included a church service in Noville and a ceremony in the hamlets of Baugez honoring a group of American prisoners executed by their German captors.

U.S. Marine Corps Gen. James Jones, the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, attended the later event.

The weekend concluded with a two-hour parade of WWII vintage vehicles through the city of Bastogne.



AP photos

Re-enactors with U.S. World War II military vehicles wait before they parade at the 60th anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge in the city center of Bastogne, Belgium, on Saturday. King Albert II and other dignitaries marked the anniversary by honoring thousands of American soldiers who died fighting Nazi Germany's desperate bid to stop the Allied advance.

"Many of us still remember," said Hadjadj, one of 24 Frenchmen, who spent the weekend clad in period military clothing. Dressing up "is our tribute to the guys who did it."

Anniversaries such as this one always draw hundreds of re-enactors. Usually, they only dress the part, but Hadjadj and his group took their passion one step further. Friday night found them digging foxholes in the Breuchy woods, southwest of Bastogne. Believe it or not they stayed put, occasionally going out "on patrol," mostly to warm up.

"We didn't sleep, not at all," Hadjadj said.

"It was cold, and it was wet," added Anton Holgersen, a Frenchman whose father served in the U.S. Navy during the war. "But it was also a good experience to see how they lived."

A half hour earlier one of today's sailors spied another group of re-enactors making their way toward the Mardasson.

Navy Cmdr. Tim Trampenau and his young son came to Bastogne for the day from Stuttgart, Germany. Two other dad-son teams joined them as part of a casual outing for their local Webelos den.

"They have fun with it, which seems kind of strange to us," Trampenau said of the re-enactors. He then smiled. "Why don't they dress up as French or Belgian guys?"

Trampenau then answered his own question, noting that people the world over like to be associated with winners. But men and women who participated in the war epitomized the term winner by anyone's standard.

One of the millions of vets from the war was Patronek's 94-year-old father, Walter, who served in the Pacific theater.

"It's been a busy year, three trips to Europe," said Patronek, eluding to earlier commemorations in Normandy, France, and Holland.

Patronek, a resident of Oklahoma and a member of a WWII airborne demonstration team, posed for pictures with people after his jump. He was a popular man, and even more popular once he started talking to the locals about his father.

"The respect and gratitude they show us when we come here is heart warming," Patronek said. "It's probably the greatest reward."

E-mail Kevin Dougherty at: doughertyk@mail.esri.com



People look at paratroopers as they jumped out of a military aircraft close to the WWII Mardasson War Memorial monument on Sunday.

IN THE WORLD

EU talks have significant meaning for Turkey

Cyprus issue could block membership

BY JAMES C. HELICKE
The Associated Press

ISTANBUL, Turkey — The European Union's decision to extend membership talks with Turkey in October, but imposed tough conditions on Turkish membership, such as taking steps toward recognizing Cyprus before the talks open in October.

The bloc on Friday agreed to start the membership talks with Turkey in October, but imposed tough conditions on Turkish membership, such as taking steps toward recognizing Cyprus before the talks open in October.



Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, left, and Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul greet supporters Saturday in Ankara, Turkey.

"Turkey is a very different country than two days ago," Gul said in Ankara. "We sense this inside Turkey. You see this when

we're together with all our neighbors. You see this in Europe. In all the Muslim countries, in Arab countries, in the Caucasus, Turk

key's position has changed."

The EU made its decision despite widespread public misgivings in Europe about welcoming a poor and crowded Muslim nation into the bloc.

"The important issue is that Turkey's direction has become definite. Turkey has entered a period of permanent stability," Gul said.

Turkey still faces a number of challenges before it can become a full EU member, which EU officials say isn't guaranteed and is unlikely for at least a decade. Turkey must, for example, broaden rights for ethnic and religious minorities and limit the military's influence in politics.

Before it can start the talks, Turkey also has to expand its customs union with the EU to include Cyprus, a move that EU officials say amounts to de facto recognition of its government.

Turkey has occupied the north-

ern part of the divided island since 1974 and refuses to recognize the internationally recognized government in the south.

On Sunday, Cypriot President Tassos Papadopoulos indicated that Cyprus could still block Turkey's EU path if Turkey refuses to sign the customs union agreement by October.

Another possible obstacle to Turkey's EU membership are plans by France and Austria, where there is strong opposition to Turkey's bid, to hold referendums on Turkey's bid.

Austrian President Heinz Fischer told the Austria Press Agency on Sunday that the EU should hold a continentwide referendum on whether Turkey should join the 25-nation bloc.

On Saturday, thousands of cheering supporters greeted Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan as he returned to the Turkish capital, Ankara, vowing to press forward with reforms as part of the EU bid.

Ex-dictator Pinochet suffers stroke

BY EDUARDO GALLARDO
The Associated Press

SANTIAGO, Chile — Former dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet has been hospitalized after suffering a stroke. It comes as an appeals court is determining whether to uphold his indictment and house arrest on human rights charges.

Pinochet was rushed to Santiago's Army Hospital on Saturday morning after "the felt bad during morning — as if he would faint," said his spokesman, retired Gen. Guillermo Garin.

Hospital officials, in a statement, said he suffered a stroke along with "impaired mobility and a neurological deficit."

Officials were not available for additional comment, but the statement said he is in stable condition and was expected to at least make a partial recovery.

Pinochet suffers from mild dementia, diabetes, arthritis and has a pacemaker. He has suffered several minor strokes in recent years and has been repeatedly hospitalized.

His hospitalization Saturday came a day after the Santiago

Court of Appeals delayed until next week a decision on whether to uphold his indictment and house arrest for the alleged kidnapping of nine dissidents and the killing of one of them during his 1973-90 military regime. The indictment and house arrest order were issued by Judge Juan Guzman.

It is unclear how his health complication will affect the trial. But his health problems rescued him from trial three years ago on other charges.

A few minutes after Pinochet's heavily guarded motorcade entered the hospital in the capital's upscale Providencia district, his wife, Lucia Hiriart, and Gen. Emilio Cheyre, the army commander, were seen entering. Several other relatives also visited.

Pinochet had an unusually active day Friday. He came to Santiago from Los Baldos, his countryside residence 80 miles southwest of the capital, where he would serve out his house arrest if the court upholds Guzman's orders.

In Santiago, he visited his office, then went to the dentist and later met with some supporters.

Yukos' core unit sold to unknown Russian firm

BY ALEX NICHOLSON
The Associated Press

MOSCOW — A previously unknown Russian company called BaikalFinansGroup bought the core production unit of oil giant Yukos at auction for \$9.3 billion on Sunday, gaining control of one of Russia's most prized oil assets for a fraction of what Yukos executives say it is worth.

The sale of the Yuganskneftegaz unit reduces Yukos to a shadow of its former self, one of the heaviest blows to a company which has been the target of a longtime government campaign. The government says it's trying to collect \$28 billion in back taxes — while Yukos officials say the Kremlin is punishing it for the politics of its now-jailed founder.

Yukos currently pumps nearly one-fifth of all of Russia's oil and supplies two percent of the world's oil consumption. The auctioned unit produced 60 percent of Yukos' output.

Foreign auditors have said the West Siberian unit was worth about \$18 billion, or nearly twice the \$9.3 billion it sold for.

Yukos executives said the unit was worth up to \$30 billion. Virtually nothing is known about the winner, BaikalFinansGroup, which emerged as a bidder at the last minute, after U.S. court issued an injunction against the auction, disrupting plans for a bid from the company that had been seen as the Kremlin's favorite to snap up the unit: the state-controlled national gas behemoth, Gazprom.

Observers, however, believe BaikalFinansGroup could be just an alternative vehicle for Gazprom, with sources of funding that are different from those initially prepared.

Stephen Dashevsky, a leading analyst for Russia's Aton brokerage, said the winner was likely another Russian company.

ITAR-Tass news agency claimed that BaikalFinansGroup's registration address — where the company had previously responded to that of one of Gazprom's structures.

Gazprom said Sunday that neither it nor Gazprom — its oil component, which was officially making the firm's bid — had any relation to the winner, the Interfax news agency reported.

Gazprom is the largest natural gas company in the world, with one-quarter of all gas reserves. A union of Gazprom and Yukos would create one of the world's energy titans.

At the auction, Gazpromnet's representatives didn't meet when BaikalFinansGroup offered to pay \$9.3 billion for the stock, just a fraction over the \$8.5 billion starting price.

The Russian government went ahead with the auction despite the injunction issued by a Houston court, where Yukos filed for bankruptcy in a last-ditch attempt to prevent the sale. Because of the injunction, a bank consortium led by Deutsche Bank froze a planned credit line to Gazprom.

Top Russian officials, including the prime minister and foreign minister, said the Houston court ruling was irrelevant on Russian soil.

Russia jailed Yukos' founder and former CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky 14 months ago, and he is currently being tried for fraud and evasion. Yukos management and outside observers say the tax claims and the jailing of Khodorkovsky are aimed at punishing the tycoon for his criticism of Kremlin policy and his perceived political ambitions and a way to reassert state control over the oil sector.

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Al-Qaida shifting strategy in Saudi Arabia

BY CRAIG WHITLOCK
The Washington Post

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia — Al-Qaida forces in Saudi Arabia have shifted their strategy and are now almost exclusively searching for U.S. and other Western targets in the kingdom while avoiding attacks on domestic institutions in a bid to strengthen their flagging network, according to security officials and Saudi experts on radical groups.

While al-Qaida retains its primary goal of eventually toppling the Saudi royal family — as Osama bin Laden made clear in an audio recording released Thursday — an 18-month campaign of car bombings, gunbattles and kidnappings has failed to generate many new recruits and has resulted in a backlash among many Saudis, even those who otherwise are critical of the government, the officials and experts said.

More than 80 people have died

Terrorist network solely focusing on U.S., Western targets in bid to bolster organization, officials say

in the attacks, the majority of them Saudis or nonwestern immigrant workers. Many people in the kingdom are not only angry over the bloodshed but also fearful of al-Qaida's attempt to turn Saudi Arabia, a deeply conservative tribal society, into an even more conservative Islamic theocracy, several Saudi reformers said in interviews.

"People want government reforms and changes, but they are more scared of al-Qaida extremists," said Mansour Nogaiddan, a former Islamic radical who has moderated his views but remains one of the most prominent critics of the Saudi government. "The common people — those people who thought their life might improve if the government changed — they are not ready to lose all

this for what some young teen-agers have in their minds as a utopia."

Despite this month's al-Qaida-sponsored attack on the U.S. consulate in Jeddah that left nine people dead, including the four assailants, Saudi government officials expressed confidence that they are steadily gaining the upper hand in their fight with the militants.

Security forces have arrested or killed 17 of the 26 most wanted militant leaders in the country. Two others on the most wanted list are believed to be dead or badly injured, while a key operational planner reportedly fled the kingdom, Saudi security officials said.

Saudi officials said they've dismantled three of four known

al-Qaida cells and the insurgents are finding it harder to obtain ammunition, weaponry and money. The attacks' size and scope have also dwindled since last year, when car bombs in Riyadh blew up two Western residential compounds and caused more than 200 casualties.

"The people who are still there are not as skillful as the ones who were there in the beginning," said Brig. Gen. Mansour Turki, spokesman for the Saudi Interior Ministry. "We feel more confident than we did in the beginning of this fight. We thought it would take much longer to be in control. We cannot deny that there are still possibilities that the terrorists could execute more acts, but they are not as strong as they were a year ago."

Still, few people are predicting the attacks will end any time soon.

"The hands-on folks see this as a serious engagement that has some time to run," said a Western official involved in counterterrorism efforts in the kingdom, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "They don't see this as ending near term. It's going to take a period of time. Is it months? Is it years? We don't know."

For the moment, al-Qaida is seeking to recover from the loss of leaders who have been arrested or killed. Abdulaziz Muqrin, a former cell leader who asserted responsibility in the deaths of three U.S. military contractors last summer, including the head of Lockheed Martin employee Paul Johnson Jr., died in a June shootout with Saudi police. Muqrin's replacement, Saleh Awli, is believed to be dead or seriously injured, Saudi officials said.

Yushchenko continues campaign



Ukrainian presidential candidate and opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko holds traditional Ukrainian bread as he walks with daughter Khrysina during the St. Nicholas Day celebration on the main square of Ukrainian capital Kiev. Over the weekend, Yushchenko and Ukrainian Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich, the country's rival presidential candidates, made overlapping campaign trips to the eastern industrial city of Kharkiv on Friday, sparking fears of more tension ahead of the Dec. 26 rerun election.

Security issues raised in France after gruesome hospital killings

The Associated Press

PARIS — France's health minister called an urgent meeting Sunday to address security at hospitals after the gruesome killings of two psychiatric hospital workers that have shaken the country.

Philippe Douste-Blazy was to meet with health workers and Interior Ministry officials after the discovery Saturday of the bodies of a nurse and a nurse's aide — one beheaded, the other with the throat slit — at a hospital in the southwestern town of Pau.

Five people, including a recent patient whom state prosecutors believe to be the key suspect, remained in police custody Sunday for questioning, police said.

The bodies were found around daybreak Saturday in a building in the geriatric ward of the hospital, where a shattered window pointed to a possible break-in, state prosecutor Eric Maurel said.

Officials said one woman's head was found on top of a TV set at the hospital.

A man who sounded drunk telephoned police overnight with "information about a violent scenario," Maurel said Saturday. The man and three others also at his home were among those taken into custody.

Union leaders faulted a staff and funding shortage funding, saying security has been a problem for months, dozens of jobs

were set to be cut, and violence took place regularly at the hospital.

It is horror, terror, fear, disgust — fear of returning to work," Cathy Sanders, a regional official from Worker's Front union, told RTL radio. "Last night, the staff was doubled" as a precaution, Sanders said.

The meeting called by Douste-Blazy was to focus on ways to combat violence and boost security at hospitals, a statement from the Health Ministry said.

The minister announced last week that he planned to present by March a mental health reform package for the country, which he said lags behind others in psychiatric treatment.

Joke text message triggers alert

CANBERRA, Australia — An Italian tourist on a flight from Sydney to Vienna caused a security alert when he sent a cell phone message to his wife claiming his plane had been hijacked by terrorists, the Australian government said Sunday.

Authorities quickly discovered the message was a hoax.

Antonio Casale, 35, sent the text message when the Lauda Air flight stopped in Kuala Lumpur to refuel, a newspaper in Sydney reported Sunday.

A Transport Ministry spokesman confirmed the report in the Sunday Telegraph.

Casale claimed terrorists were in control of the plane and were taking the passengers to an unknown destination.

His distressed wife contacted Italian police, who immediately contacted the Italian Embassy in Canberra, who in turn contacted Australian police.

Fire breaks out on Italian ferry

ROME — A small fire broke out on a ferry carrying hundreds of people from Sicily to the Italian mainland, and the boat was towed back to port on Sunday to be evacuated, a port authority official said.

No one was seriously injured on board the ferry Florio, although many passengers fell ill from the smoke, a Palermo port official said. Some passengers required hospital treatment, Sky TG24 television reported.

All 472 people on board were safely evacuated when the boat reached Palermo, Sicily, the official said. Some disoriented, ailing passengers had to be carried off the boat or burst into tears when they reached land. Passengers spent the night in a panic, with the ferry tossing on rough seas, smoke filling the air and no electricity on board.

Turkmenistan parliament elections

ASHGABAT, Turkmenistan — Polling stations were nearly empty early on election day Sunday in the capital of Turkmenistan, a tightly controlled former Soviet republic. Election officials said they may carry ballot boxes door-to-door to seek votes.

At least 50 percent of the country's 3 million eligible voters must take part for the parliamentary elections to be valid.

The 131 candidates contesting 50 seats represent different public organizations such as trade unions and women's associations.

From The Associated Press

Chinese president visits Macau

Hu proclaims former Portuguese colony a success under Beijing's rule

BY MIN LEE

The Associated Press

MACAU — Chinese President Hu Jintao arrived in Macau on Sunday for celebrations of the former Portuguese colony's fifth anniversary as Chinese territory, proclaiming the small gambling enclave a success under Beijing's rule.

"In the five years since Macau returned to the motherland, it has achieved significant results in all aspects, such as its economy and society," he said. Macau has seen double-digit economic growth and a drop in violence since it came under Chinese control on Dec. 20, 1999.

Hu hugged a young girl in a red dress who presented him with a bouquet as he stepped from an Air China jet. Macau leader Edmund Ho had boarded the plane to receive China's top leader, and disembarked behind him.

Dozens of children waved red Chinese flags and green Macau flags as Hu walked over to reporters gathered near the plane, and made brief remarks before leaving in his motorcade.

Security was tightened ahead of Hu's two-day visit, with officials sealing off roads in this small coastal city. Macau authorities refused entry to veteran Hong Kong activist-turned-lawmaker Leung Kwok-hung, who arrived by ferry Saturday, hoping to stage a protest on Sunday coinciding with Hu's visit.

Leung said he had planned to denounce China's brutal 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown on student protesters.

Hu later inaugurated a new bridge linking Macau's mainland to the outlying island of



Chinese President Hu Jintao points upward as he listens to a museum official during a visit to the ruins of St. Paul's Church in Macau on Sunday. His wife Liu Yongqing, standing to Hu's right, and Chief Executive of Macau Edmund Ho, second left, look up. Hu traveled to Macau to attend fifth anniversary celebrations of the establishment of the Macau Special Administrative Region.

Taipa and toured the remaining façade of the Church of St. Paul, a local landmark. The body of the church burned down in an 1835 fire.

Besides taking part in festivities celebrating the territory's five years as part of China, Hu also was expected to receive a briefing from Tung Chee-hwa, the leader of neighboring Hong Kong — a former British colony that re-

turned to China more than seven years ago.

Observers in Taiwan were closely watching Hu's visit for any public comment on the island, China's rival. The two sides split amid civil war in 1949, but China claims self-ruled, democratic Taiwan as its territory and has threatened to attack if the island declares formal independence.

Hu didn't mention Taiwan during his public speeches Sunday.

Political survivor

CANBERRA, Australia — Despite bitter recriminations over his decision to invade Iraq, Prime Minister John Howard will secure his place as one of the great political survivors this week when he becomes the second-longest serving leader in Australia's history.

On Tuesday, the 65-year-old Howard, a former suburban lawyer, overtakes charismatic Bob Hawke, who formerly led the center-left Labor Party and was prime minister for eight years, nine months and 10 days.

It will be payback day for Howard, who was opposition leader when his center-right coalition suffered a crushing defeat by Hawke in 1987.

Unexplained noise

JAKARTA, Indonesia — Indonesians saw an object with a tail of fire hurtling toward earth near their capital early Sunday before hearing a loud explosion. An expert speculated it might have been a meteor.

There were no reports of injuries.

Indonesian air force radar detected an unidentified object falling toward the earth at a great speed before disappearing around the same time the noise was heard, a spokesman said.

There were no reports of any objects hitting the earth in or close to the capital.

From The Associated Press

Message for our men and women in uniform...

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OPINION

The nuance of necessary deception in war

Can reporters be trusted with war information? Can the government be trusted? We're still finding out — or maybe we're not finding out. One of the great successes of World War II was Operation Fortitude.

James Pinkerton



It was Operation Fortitude, aimed at cloaking the D-Day invasion in a "bodyguard of lies." The Allies wished to convince the Germans that the assault across the English Channel would land near the town of Pas de Calais, at the Channel's narrowest point.

So the Allies created a phantom army, with inflatable rubber tanks and paper-mâché airplanes. To further the illusion, they created a fake navy, too, and put out faux radio transmissions. Meanwhile, the real assault forces were assembling farther south. And on the morning of June 6, 1944, the Allies landed at Normandy, 200 miles from Calais.

Not only was the Normandy coast lightly defended, but the Germans were not convinced that the "real" attack was coming at Calais. By the time they figured out the deception, it was too late.

So to the obvious question: Could anything so sneaky as Operation Fortitude be

pulled off today? Could thousands of people be kept quiet in a world full of cell phones, e-mail and text-messaging, all interfacing with an ever-proliferating number of cable news channels, bloggers and list-servers? Which is to say, in other words, that "the media" today aren't just a few reporters who might be pep-talked or intimidated into keeping a secret. Instead, the media include millions of people representing different traditions, different countries, different loyalties. Could such a buzzing collectivity even begin to keep a secret? The United States is hardly helpless. American forces deposed Saddam Hussein in just three weeks of fighting last year.

Yet on the other hand, the larger objectives in the "global war on terror" — defeating the insurgents, democratizing Iraq, winning hearts and minds across the Middle East — remain to be achieved. And it's apparent that reports and images from Iraq, most notably the Abu Ghraib prison photos and the video of the Marine shooting a wounded man in Fallujah, aren't helping the American cause.

It's not so much that the media are untrustworthy — although many in the military might argue that they are — it's that the "press" from Al-Jazeera reporters to the humblest freelancer, is simply uncontrollable. And absent an enormous paradigm shift, that's not going to change.

But now, the military is preparing just such a paradigm shift. On Dec. 1, the Los Angeles Times revealed that in September the Pentagon had established a "strategic communications office" to wage information — or disinformation — warfare in Iraq. The Times reported that an Oct. 14 an-



Courtesy of Signal Corps

With Operation Fortitude in motion, U.S. assault troops huddle behind the protective front of their landing craft as it nears a beachhead on the northern coast of France on D-Day.

nouncement by the Marines of a seeming attack on Fallujah, carried on CNN, was, in fact, a fake-out of the enemy.

It's hard to argue against deceiving the enemy in wartime, but it must also be noted that such deceptions are soon covered by the media, which is to say, uncovered.

Of course, it's possible that the military has launched a hundred other Fortitude-like fakes that have gone unreported. But now we know — or we think we know — that the Pentagon plans to create a "director of central information" to codify "strategic information." That new Pen-

tagon post is not to be confused with the "national intelligence director," the new slot created to oversee the CIA and other spy outfits — one thinks.

But now that the directorate of information has been revealed, what does that revelation do to the American government's credibility? Is it really a good idea to have, in effect, a Ministry of Deception if its existence is known to the world? In the future, it might be harder for the enemy to know what's going on, and that's good. But it will surely be harder for Americans to know what's going on, and that's not so good.

James Pinkerton is a Newsday columnist.

GIs also suffer wounds that medicine can't heal

BY ROBERT CORNEJO

"Doesn't it figure that a second lieutenant got shot?" I overheard a noncommissioned officer say to his buddy. It was the afternoon of Dec. 20, 1989, and I was being evacuated to a military hospital in Panama on board a troop-carrying special operations helicopter.

It was 15 years ago that I was wounded on the first wave of Operation Just Cause, the U.S. invasion of Panama. Since that day, I haven't often recounted my experience to others, and I mention Panama now not to celebrate that war but to bring attention to those who return home wounded from Iraq or Afghanistan. Our soldiers today are trained to do everything that the military asks of them in combat except maybe two things: come home wounded from war and deal with life afterward.

As a young field artillery officer, I was part of the first wave of the 82nd Airborne task force that parachuted into Torrijos International Airport near Panama City at 2 a.m. on Dec. 20. Our mission was to assemble around the howitzers that had been air-dropped onto the airport ahead of us. After I met up with my unit and our guns, we were ordered to move from the airfield to a forward firing position to provide support for an infantry assault against the Panamanian Defense Forces.

Around noon our convoy of two howitzers, several trucks and a light tank departed the relative safety of the secure airport. To get our guns to the planned firing position near the Pacora River, our heavily armed group drove through the village of Cayaba. A couple of blocks short of the north end of town, when dressed in civilian clothes and driving a small white car ambushed us with gunfire and grenades in a drive-by shooting. As the attackers accelerated through our halted

convoy, we returned fire. I slid off my truck, got into a prone position in the street and fired a few rounds at the ambushers. Then I was hit. I felt a sharp, stinging pain in my right hip, and my leg stiffened in a muscle spasm. A noncommissioned officer riding in the truck picked me up, and the convoy quickly moved out.

I had been shot by an M-16 bullet — most likely friendly fire that ricocheted off the street during the brief firefight, which had lasted at most a minute. Both Panamanians in the car were dead. Two of us were wounded.

Twenty-four hours later, I was back in the United States in a hospital bed at San Antonio's Brooke Army Medical Center. In the next few days, I underwent surgery on my wound and was transferred back to my home state at Fort Bragg, N.C. While I should have been happy to be recovering well, I wasn't. Instead, I was embarrassed

when I called my father in Virginia to tell him that I had been deployed to Panama and had returned to the States wounded.

On Christmas Day I watched TV coverage of the Panama invasion and began to replay the minute-long firefight in my mind over and over. I blamed myself for getting off the truck and onto the street. I was angry at myself for becoming the stereotypical lieutenant who gets himself wounded during his first combat experience. I wondered if I had failed my men by departing the battle early. I asked "what if?" again and again.

I am not in a position to speak for the wounded veterans of today. I can only assume that some of our current war wounded experience feelings similar to mine. I believe that most of these men and women are not ready to share their combat experience with others, as I do now. For a time, they may choose to deliberate on that moment they were wounded. For me, this routine con-

tinued for the better part of a year, until life's other concerns eventually displaced my internal debate.

The anniversary of the Panama invasion elicits personal memories for me. Others will have similar memories as they think back to the day they were wounded in Iraq or Afghanistan. Many of today's combat wounded will not be as lucky as I was, but will suffer permanent disability resulting from the devastating effect of modern insurgent weapons.

I don't think our military can ever train soldiers to prepare for coming home wounded or for dealing with life afterward. But I do think that we as Americans should keep in mind that most wounded veterans don't want unnecessary or extraordinary attention. What they are more likely to want is privacy and understanding while they come to grips with the moment they were hit.

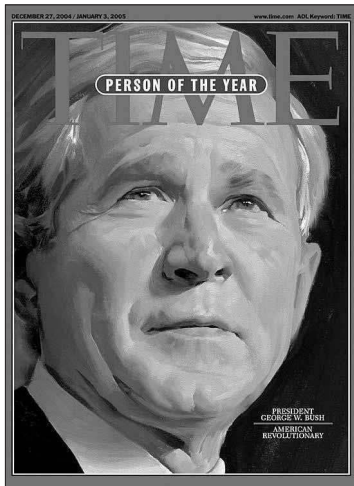
Robert Cornejo is a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army. This column first appeared in The Washington Post.

Mallard Fillmore

BY BRUCE TINSLEY



IN THE STATES



Time magazine chose President Bush as its 2004 Person of the Year.

His Time: Bush selected 2004 Person of the Year

BY SAM DOLNICK
The Associated Press

NEW YORK — After winning re-election and "reshaping the rules of politics to fit his 10-gallon leadership style," President George W. Bush for the second time was chosen as Time magazine's Person of the Year.

The magazine's editors tapped Bush "for sharpening the debate until the choices bleed, for reframing reality to match his design, for gambling his fortunes — and ours — on his faith in the power of leadership."

Time's 2004 Person of the Year package, on newsstands Monday, includes an Oval Office interview with Bush, an interview with his father, former President George H. W. Bush, and a profile of Bush's chief political adviser, Karl Rove.

In an interview with the magazine, Bush attributed his victory over Democratic candidate John Kerry to his foreign policy and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"The election was about the use of American influence," Bush said.

After a grueling campaign,

Bush remains a polarizing figure in America and around the world, and that's part of the reason he earned the magazine's honor, said Managing Editor Jim Kelly.

"Many, many Americans deeply wish he had not won," Kelly said in a telephone interview. "And yet he did."

In the Time article, Bush said he relishes that some people dislike him.

"I think the natural instinct for most people in the political world is that they want people to like them," Bush said. "On the other hand, I think sometimes I take kind of a delight in who the critics are."

Bush joins six other presidents who have twice won the magazine's top honor: Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower (first as a general), Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton.

Kelly said other candidates included Michael Moore and Mel Gibson, "because in different ways their movies tapped to deep cultural streams," and political strategist Rove, who is widely credited with engineering Bush's win.

Poll: Judging Bushes

NEW YORK — President Bush won re-election, unlike his father, but lags behind the elder Bush in the public's view of several personal attributes, according to a Time poll.

The poll examined public views of President George W. Bush compared with those of the first President George Bush on attributes:

■ **Honest and trustworthy:** The former president, by 37 percent to 19 percent.

■ **Understands the issues:** The former president, by 43 percent to 25 percent.

■ **Likable:** The former president, by 38 percent to 28 percent.

■ **Sticks to positions, even if unpopular:** The current president, by 56 percent to 16 percent.

The Time-SRBI poll of 1,009 adults was taken Dec. 13-14 and has a margin of sampling error of 3 percentage points.

From The Associated Press

Republican Senators at odds over Rumsfeld's future

BY GENARO C. ARMAS
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Acknowledging mistakes in Iraq by the Bush administration, leading Republicans expressed reluctance Sunday that the White House replace Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, who has lost the confidence of some GOP lawmakers over the conduct of the war.

The chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee said a change at the top of the Pentagon would be too disruptive, given the elections scheduled in Iraq for Jan. 30. Sen. John Warner, R-Va., also said the administration was addressing the mistakes that have occurred in the aftermath of the U.S.-led ouster of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

"We should not at this point in time entertain any idea of changing those responsibilities in the Pentagon," Warner told NBC's "Meet the Press."



Lott



Rumsfeld

field should step down. "I find it astounding. ... Things are worse than they've ever been" in Iraq, Hagel told CBS' "Face the Nation." Hagel said the decision to replace Rumsfeld was Bush's.

More than 1,300 American troops have died since the war began in March 2003.

On Sunday, car bombs rocked Iraq's two holiest Shiite cities, killing at least 62 people and wounding more than 120. In Baghdad, the capital, dozens of gunmen killed three Iraqi employees of the organization running next month's elections.

U.S. troops in Kuwait have complained to Rumsfeld about long deployments and a lack of armored vehicles and other equipment.

Rumsfeld, who agreed to Bush's request earlier this month to remain in the Cabinet during the president's second term, won a vote of confidence from the White House on Sunday.

"Secretary Rumsfeld is doing a spectacular job," the president's chief of staff, Andrew Card, told ABC's "This Week."

Rumsfeld's performance has come under criticism even from congressional Republicans, including GOP Sens. Trent Lott of Mississippi and John McCain of Arizona.

Lott said last week that Rumsfeld did not listen to uniformed officers and that Bush should make a change at the Pentagon in the next year or so.



Warner

Lawmakers criticize secretary for machine-signed condolence letters

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Last week, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld announced he would personally sign condolence letters to the family members of U.S. troops killed in action rather than letting a machine affix his signature.

Republican and Democratic members of Congress criticized the embattled Pentagon chief on Sunday for not signing the letters himself all along.

"My goodness, that's the least that we could expect of the secretary of defense, is having some personal attention paid by him," said Sen. Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., noting that President Bush signs such letters himself.

"If the president of the United States can find time to do that, why can't the Secretary of Defense?" Hagel, a Vietnam veteran, asked on CBS' "Face the Nation."

In a statement Friday, Rumsfeld announced the change in policy and said

more than 1,000 condolence letters had gone out to relatives of Americans killed in military action during the global fight against terrorism.

"While I have not individually signed each one, in the interest of ensuring expeditious contact with grieving family members, I have directed that in the future I sign each letter," Rumsfeld said in the statement.

The statement, which was reported Friday by Stars and Stripes, did not specifically refer to troops killed in Iraq, though family members of soldiers who died there told Stars and Stripes they were angry with Rumsfeld's apparent stamped signature. More than 1,300 American troops have died since the war began in March 2003.

Messages left with the Pentagon about the criticism from lawmakers were not immediately returned Sunday.

The signature flap was the latest in a string of criticism in recent weeks of the defense secretary's handling of the war in Iraq.

But Warner said Bush should stay the course, especially with the Iraqi vote next month.

"We are going to have a tough period after that election and we should press our confidence in the commander in chief and his principal subordinate," Warner said. "And he will fight to get those budgets, and he will earn the confidence of the people in the Senate and the House so that he can continue to do that which is best for the country."

Going for the gold

Salvation Army hopes mysterious donations of coins keep coming

BY JAN DENNIS
The Associated Press

PEORIA, Ill. — Salvation Army officials don't know who has been dropping gold coins into their holiday kettles over the past 20 years, but they hope the mysterious donations continue.

More than 300 gold coins have been collected since the early 1980s, with an average value of about \$200 each, said Cliff Marshall, spokesman for the charity in Chicago, where the tradition began.

Chicago bell-ringers have received in 10 gold coins so far this year. They aren't the only ones.

In Kirksville, Mo., someone donated a gold coin that was minted 20 years before the Civil War, worth nearly \$1,000. A \$400 South African Krugerrand was dropped in a kettle in Bloomington, Ill., meaning 12 extra families will get a complete Christmas dinner.

But officials still don't know where the coins come from.

The mysterious tradition began in 1982, when someone slipped a



CHARLES CITY (IOWA) PRESS/AP

This gold coin, valued at \$360, was found in the Salvation Army kettle at a Theisen's store in Charles City, Iowa. The tradition of placing anonymous donations of gold coins in the kettles dates back to 1982.

gold coin into a kettle in the Chicago suburb of Crystal Lake. The donations have occurred there ever since and have spread across Illinois and about a dozen other states.

The phantom donors almost always conceal the coins, usually folding dollar bills around them. They range from small gold pieces worth about \$15 to Krugerrands that can fetch \$600 from collectors.

Rich Draeger, spokesman for Salvation Army's Peoria division,

said the timing of the donations suggest they might be an inside job. He said gold coins tend to show up when giving starts to lag, indicating it might be an attempt by the charity to generate extra publicity.

Daniel Borchoff, president of the American Institute of Philanthropy, a charity watchdog group, doubts the Salvation Army is placing the coins to create publicity.

"They're a heavy-duty Christian group, so that may go against their principals," he said.



Kia Spectra gets lowest rating in frontal crash test

BY DEE-ANN DURBIN
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Kia Spectra is the first vehicle since 2001 to get the insurance industry's worst safety rating in a frontal crash test, according to results released Sunday.

The Spectra, a small, four-door sedan that starts at \$13,240, got the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety's lowest rating of poor after a crash test dummy's head, chest and legs were injured in the 40 mph crash test. The last car to get that rating was the Chevrolet Cavalier in 2001.

"Most manufacturers have figured out how to design vehicles to do a good job protecting people in frontal crashes," said Adrian Lund, the institute's chief operating officer. "Kia lags behind its competitors."

Kia Motors America Inc. said it has met with institute officials to determine how to improve the vehicle's performance. The company also said it was comfortable with the level of safety the Spectra provides.

"Occupant safety is a priority for Kia," the company said in a statement. "In the development of this product the Spectra has undergone a battery of tests, and we continue to have a high degree of confidence in the real-world protection offered by this vehicle."

Only two small cars — the Mazda 3 and the Hyundai Elantra — earned the institute's highest rating of good in this round of testing. The Suzuki Forenza and the Saturn ION were rated acceptable, the institute's second-highest rating.

The institute tests vehicles in a 40 mph crash and rates them based on three criteria: the amount the vehicle crumples into the driver's space, injuries to the crash test dummy and a slow-motion analysis of how well the seat belt worked.

A good rating means a driver wearing a seat belt probably would suffer only minor injuries in a similar crash. A poor rating means a risk of severe injury exists.

Lund said he was surprised the Spectra performed so poorly. The institute has conducted this test for a decade and most manufacturers have built vehicles that can withstand it, he said.

Lund said 11 small cars have good ratings. Besides the Mazda 3 and the Hyundai Elantra, they are the Volkswagen New Beetle and Jetta, the Subaru Impreza and Aerio, the Mini Cooper, the Toyota Corolla, the Ford Focus, the Mitsubishi Lancer and the Honda Civic.

Most of those cars were tested earlier by the insurance institute, which tests vehicles as they are redesigned.

Some Mass. firms deny gay spouses benefits

The Associated Press

BOSTON — Some employers with federally regulated health plans have decided not to extend health benefits to spouses of gay workers, saying the plans are not bound by Massachusetts' same-sex marriage law.

General Dynamics Corp., FedEx Corp. and Caritas Christi Health Care are among the employers that do not provide married gay workers in Massachusetts with the same health benefits available to heterosexual married couples.

"In determining the definition of dependent spouse, General Dynamics applies the spouse definition from the federal Defense of Marriage Act," the Virginia-based defense contractor, which has 3,000 workers in Massachusetts, said in a statement to the Boston Globe.

The 1996 Defense of Marriage Act denied federal recognition of same-sex marriages by defining marriage as between a man and a woman.

The employers provide medi-

cal care through self-insured health plans in which the company — not an insurer — collects premiums and pays the medical bills of its workers.

Such self-insured plans, which are used to save money amid skyrocketing health care costs, are regulated by federal law.

Sharen Litvin, a Boston labor lawyer, said companies with self-funded plans likely cannot be compelled to extend coverage to spouses of gay workers.

Some employers that self-insure, however, extended coverage to spouses after May 17, when gay marriage became legal in Massachusetts. They include Gillette Co., Union Grid USA, and Unifire, the nation of garment and hotel workers.

Gay rights supporters argue that same-sex marriage opens the door to reinterpretation of a host of state and federal laws. "There are some good legal reasons why we might be able to challenge [denial of benefits]," Michele Grandia, attorney for Boston-based Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders.

Free holiday sign

LA HOUMA — Some people wanted to know why "Season's Greetings" adorned the Terrebonne Parish Government Tower, instead of "Merry Christmas."

It turns out the decision had nothing to do with religion or political correctness.

The sign was free. Parish council members said that if someone donates a "Merry Christmas" sign, it will go up, also. The "Season's Greetings" sign was donated to the parish by the Terrebonne General Medical Center a few years ago.

Holiday lights Web cam

CO LAFAYETTE — After festooning his house with 17,000 Christmas lights, Alex Komarnitsky wanted more than just passers-by to enjoy the spectacle.

He got his holiday wish. His interactive Web site allowed Internet users to turn the lights on and off with the click of a mouse at attracting thousands.

Another Web site recently alerted users about his interactive page. "It said, 'This guy's Web site is funny. Turn the lights on and off and annoy the neighbors,'" Komarnitsky said.

This month alone, more than 1.3 million Internet browsers — including about 38,000 from a German domain — have visited the site.

Prison for abuser

MA NORTHAMPTON — A Huntington man was sentenced to serve nine to 10 years in prison after pleading guilty to breaking into his estranged wife's home and ambushing her when she returned from a court hearing that extended a restraining order against him.

Police said Donald G. Cornelius Jr., 47, hid in the basement until his wife came home from the courthouse, and then attacked her with a metal bar from an exercise machine.

Kimberly Anderson told the judge at the sentencing that when she is home alone, she still imagines the sound of his steps on the stairs.

Her nose was broken, she underwent several operations to repair her face, and she lost most of the hearing in one ear in the attack.

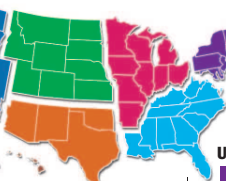
Drug test complaint

TX SAN ANTONIO — A fired drug screener was free on bond after he was accused of having sex with a woman in exchange for a false report that there were no signs of drugs in her urine.

Adrian Barrientos was released by U.S. Magistrate Judge Nancy Novak on a \$25,000 unsecured bond. Barrientos, 29, faces a charge of obstruction of justice, which carries a possible penalty of up to 10 years in federal prison.

Barrientos, formerly employed by a company that drug-tests convicted offenders, was accused by an FBI agent in a criminal complaint of misdeeds involving a female supervised offender who used cocaine this summer.

The complaint stated that Barrientos asked the woman if her urine would test positive. After she answered "yes," Barrientos told her



AMERICAN ROUNDUP

that he would falsely report on her drug-test form that her urine tested negative in exchange for sex, the complaint said.

Hefty donation

MN MINNEAPOLIS — A prosperous businessman didn't think he was entitled to his 2004 Social Security payments, so he became an early Santa Claus for the Salvation Army.

The man dropped a check for \$14,845 into a bell ringer's red kettle outside a bookstore in downtown Minneapolis.

The man, who declined to be identified, released a written statement through Salvation Army spokeswoman Annette Bauer, who had sought out the man for an explanation.

He said he will receive \$20,295 in Social Security payments in 2004 and didn't really need it because "I have considerable income now and should continue to have considerable income if I ever do retire."

Band to play for Bush

NV RENO — The McQueen High School band will finally get its chance to perform for President Bush. The Presidential Inaugural Committee chose the Reno school to represent Nevada in the Jan. 20 Inauguration Day parade in Washington.



It takes teamwork

Although the wind was a little calmer, it was still strong enough to make it difficult for Wilson Elementary School fifth-graders Dylan Ladwig, Ryan Sager and Brian Jun as they take down the Wisconsin and American flags after school in Beaver Dam, Wis.

Two months ago, the band was barred from performing at a Reno campaign rally attended by Bush. A school district policy prohibits school-sponsored organizations from engaging in party politics.

Unpaid wages inquiry

NY ALBANY — Owners of a diner have agreed to pay \$76,000 to end an investigation into whether they failed to pay workers minimum wage and overtime in a case both sides expect will be repeated elsewhere in the state.

The Front Page Diner on Staten Island settled with state Attorney General Eliot J. Spitzer's investigation without admitting guilt, according to a Spitzer spokesman and the diner's attorney.

Spitzer accused the diner's owners of paying wages as low as \$2.25 an hour to wait staff between August 1999 and August 2004.

The minimum wage for restaurant workers accepting tips is \$3.30 an hour, while the minimum hourly wage for other workers is \$5.15.

Assistant attorneys general Michael Higgins and James Versocki also said the diner paid no overtime to cooks, busboys, and dishwashers despite work weeks up to 60 hours.

The diner's payroll process will be subject to monitoring and help in contacting workers and former workers to collect from the settlement, according to the agreement.

School shelves bonuses

CO GREELEY — The University of Northern Colorado shelved plans to award \$189,000 in bonuses to administrators next year after an angry backlash from faculty members who haven't gotten a merit raise in two years.

Faculty got a one-time payment equaling 2 percent of their salaries in June while nine administrators received \$103,000 in bonuses. UNC President Kay Norton suspended next year's bonus for administrators and promised a campus-wide discussion of compensation.

Slaying probe closed

AL BEAUREGARD — Prosecutors closed an investigation into a triple slaying by presenting to a grand jury circumstantial evidence found in a suicide note.

Bernard Vaughan, 69, shot himself two days after the March 26 shooting deaths of three men on his property. The note made reference to post-traumatic stress disorder, a result of his military service, and mentioned the "turmoil of the last 24 hours," Sheriff Jay Jones said.

Record farmland values

IA AMES — The value of Iowa farmland has hit an all-time high. An annual survey by Iowa State University shows that farmland values jumped 15.6 percent this year, hitting a record \$2,629.

That's an average increase of \$354 an acre. Scott County's average price was \$4,167 dollars an acre, the first time the average price of farmland in Iowa topped \$4,000.



Sweet holiday treat

A 1,150 pound polar bear at SeaWorld San Diego's Wild Arctic attraction links to a gingerbread man before devouring the tasty treat.



Blue reindeer

Bruce Aiken Elementary kindergarten student Mighuel Perez is not too excited to be singing Christmas carols at the Sunrise Mall in Brownsville, Texas.



Taking a break

A man relaxes in the warmth of the sun during the noon hour at a plaza in downtown Los Angeles. Last week temperatures hovered around the 80-degree mark under clear skies.



Balancing act

Dancers Jeffrey Kazin, foreground, Amber Sloan, left background, David Parker, center, and Emily Tschiffel pose from Parker's "Nut/Cracked" in a New York studio. Parker and his Bang Group performed the piece at the Dance Theater Workshop in New York.



Who goes there?

A young snowy owl perches on an insulator atop a power pole along near Somers, Mont.

Burglar facing hard time

NJ NEW BRUNSWICK — A burglar who broke into more than 100 homes in five counties and stole \$2 million to support his casino gambling habit faces a long prison term.

Samuel Krosky, 44, could get 25 years in prison when he's sentenced April 1. As part of a plea agreement with prosecutors, Krosky is required to make restitution to his victims.

'Predator' to stay in jail

VA PORTSMOUTH — A circuit judge ruled that Roy Young Jr., 32, who is serving a six-year sentence for molesting two girls, is a "sexually violent predator" and will remain in state custody even after his term is completed. A state law passed in 2003 allows sex offenders to be held if it is proved that they're likely to commit similar acts.

Union contracts OK'd

MI LANSING — The State Civil Service Commission approved pay contracts for unionized state workers and set pay levels for others not covered by union contracts. The agreements include pay increases of 10 percent spread over three years. As a concession to save the state money, most workers will receive 38 hours of pay for 40-hour work weeks from January until next November.

Waste ink dumping

CA SAN FRANCISCO — An Oakland newspaper publishing company and two men have been charged with crimes for allegedly dumping hundreds of gallons of waste ink in a vacant lot in San Francisco.

Alameda Publishing Corp., which publishes the San Francisco Post, the Richmond Post and the Berkeley Tri-City Post as well as the Spanish-language El Mundo, was charged with felony dumping violations that could result in millions of dollars in fines.

The company has already paid the \$9,000 to clean up the site.

The company's plant manager, Victor Martinez, 61, has been arrested along with William Araujo, 50. Both are charged with illegal transportation and disposal of hazardous waste and could be sentenced to three years in state prison if convicted.

Glass tower planned

DE WILMINGTON — A developer announced plans to build a \$65 million, 18-story glass office tower in Wilmington. The tower to be built by the Buccini-Pollin Group is the third speculative downtown office building to be announced this year. An office tower without a lead tenant hasn't been erected in downtown Wilmington for more than 10 years.

Permits for strippers

TX SAN ANTONIO — The City Council on Friday approved a measure that will require strippers to wear permits while they are on stage.

City Councilman Chip Haas pushed the amended human display ordinance as making it easier for police to identify dancers.

But a lawyer representing sever-

al strip clubs in the city said it would also create a physical danger by making it easier for an obsessed customer to find out a dancer's real name and where she lives. Attorney Jim Deegear has said he will file a lawsuit challenging the measure, which the 11-member council passed unanimously early Friday during a marathon meeting that began Thursday afternoon.

Deegear says the city's strict rules are part of an effort to drive his clients out of business.

Llama mistaken for deer

WI MADISON — A hunter faces two charges after shooting a llama that he mistook for a deer.

John M. Burger was charged with trespassing and a misdemeanor or count of mistreatment of animals after he killed a llama named Snicker Doodle Silk that was grazing on land owned by Susan and Kevin Kovacs.

According to a criminal complaint, Burger was on land adjacent to the Kovacs' property when he shot the animal Nov. 9.

Burger told a Dane County sheriff's deputy he was in a tree stand when he spotted an animal grazing about 60 yards north.

Burger said he thought the animal was a deer, probably a doe, and he waited for it to raise its head. It did not and he shot at it. He then walked toward the animal and saw herds of llamas running around, realizing his mistake.

Burger reported the accidental shooting to the Kovacs family and apologized.

The trespassing charge carries a fine of up to \$1,000 and the other count carries a fine of up to \$10,000 and a nine-month jail term.

Internet while camping

TX AUSTIN — Campers at five state parks will soon be able to check e-mail or browse the Internet. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department announced a pilot program to offer high-speed wireless Internet service at Choke Canyon, Blanco, Balmorea, Goose Island and Ray Roberts Lake state parks starting Jan. 1.

Security funding cut

TN MEMPHIS — U.S. Rep. Harold Ford has asked Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge in a letter why Memphis' homeland security funding has been cut from \$8.2 million to nothing.

Ford indicated that the threat of terror still exists in the city — a major distribution hub with one of the busiest cargo airports in the world. The cut will affect funding for first responders.

Mining project begins

NV BATTLE MOUNTAIN — Newmont Mining Corp. began construction on the controversial Phoenix gold mine site where copper and gold have been mined for almost 150 years.

The \$200 million project near Battle Mountain raised concerns over acid rock drainage and long-term effects on nearby water. A federal review found actions by Newmont will minimize environmental risks.

Stories and photos from wire services



Rays of light

The Creekmore Holiday Express rolls through the tunnel of lights in this long exposure at Creekmore Park's decoration of lights in Fort Smith, Ark.

FACES

Obama signs book deal worth \$1.9M

U.S. Sen.-elect Barack Obama, whose 1995 book jumped onto best-seller lists after his keynote address to the Democratic National Convention, has landed a three-book deal worth \$1.9 million.

Crown Publishing Group and Random House Children's Books, divisions of Random House Inc., announced Friday that Obama will write two books for adults and one for children.

He'll be paid an \$850,000 advance for each adult book and \$200,000 for the children's book, said Obama spokesman Robert Gibbs. Proceeds from the children's book, which Obama will work on with his wife, Michelle, and their two young daughters, will go to charity, Gibbs said.

The contract is contingent on the approval of the Senate Ethics Committee, he said.

Obama, 43, will become the sole black U.S. senator — and only the fifth in history — when he is sworn in next month.

Sheen, Richards expecting another child

Christmas has come early for Charlie Sheen and Denise Richards.

The couple are expecting their second child, due in June, *People* magazine reports. Their first, daughter Sam Sheen, was born in March.

"They are incredibly thrilled and I couldn't think of a better Christmas present for the both of them and for little Sam," the magazine quotes Richards as saying. Richards, 33, and Sheen, 39, married in June 2002. The couple met while shooting the film "Good Advice" in 2000. They began dating after Richards did guest spots on Sheen's former TV series, "Spin City."



Richards and Sheen

Legal troubles continue for DMX

Rapper DMX was arrested for allegedly driving more than 100 mph on a highway in the suburbs of New York City, a week after he pleaded guilty to driving through an airport parking gate while on drugs.

The 33-year-old rapper, whose real name is Earl Simmons, was pulled over Wednesday evening on Interstate 684 after driving 104 mph in a 65 mph zone, police said.

Because his license had been suspended after the airport incident, Simmons was arrested on charges of third-degree aggravated unlicensed operation. State police said he was also charged with speeding and driving an unregistered vehicle.

Simmons was released on \$350 bail and ordered to appear in court Jan. 18 in North Castle, about 40 miles north of New York City.

His lawyer, Murray Richman, said he could not comment because he was not allowed to the rapper.

Simmons was charged in June with smashing into a gate with his vehicle at Kennedy Airport after telling a parking lot attendant he was a federal agent. He later admitted to being on Valium at the time.

High-priced high rise for Murdoch

Rupert Murdoch, the billionaire CEO of News Corp., has offered to buy a three-story penthouse for \$44 million, which would be the highest price ever paid for a Manhattan apartment if the deal goes through.

Murdoch and his family must also be approved by the co-op board of the building, at 834 Fifth Avenue. The New York Times reported Friday, citing an unnamed source informed of the negotiations.

Howard Rubenstein, a spokesman for Murdoch, declined to comment to the Times.

The New York Post, which is owned by News Corp., reported last week that the apartment, the former home of Laurence S. Rockefeller, had been sold — but did not name the buyer.

The 20-room apartment spans the 14th, 15th and 16th floors of the building. It has 8,000 square feet of floor space and spacious terraces on each floor. The monthly maintenance fee is \$21,469.07.

Stories and photos from The Associated Press



BY DAVID GERMAIN
The Associated Press

TORONTO

Bobby Darin wanted it all and pretty much got it: Pop music stardom, success as a folk singer, a reputation as one of the great stage showmen, acclaim as a movie actor.

When it came to his Darin film biography "Beyond the Sea," Kevin Spacey also wanted it all and pretty much got it. Spacey starred, directed, co-wrote, sang and danced.

He's even going on tour with a 19-piece big band to promote the film, crooning tunes from Darin's eclectic repertoire, which includes "Spish-Splash," "Mack the Knife," "Dream Lover," "If I Were a Carpenter" and the movie's title track.

Multitasking to that extent is a risk for any actor. For Spacey, the gamble is even greater, coming at a career downturn in which his big-screen bankability has waned.

Since winning his second Academy Award for 1999's "American Beauty," Spacey, 45, has starred in four straight studio flicks that proved to be critical and commercial duds — "Pay It Forward," "K-PAX," "The Shipping News" and "The Life of David Gale."

"The studio films I've done, I was an actor for hire, so the responsibility of being the storyteller wasn't mine," Spacey said in an interview at September's Toronto International Film Festival, where "Beyond the Sea" premiered. "And in this case it is, so if this film works, it's because of the vast talents of a great number of people, and if it doesn't, there's nobody to blame but me. And I accept that going in. My eyes are wide open."

Early reaction to the film has been lukewarm, though Spacey earned praise for his warm, energetic performance and spirited vocals.

Spacey had performed in musicals from his early teens into his 20s, but good singing roles had since eluded him. He said he chose to sing himself because he's generally not a fan of lip-synched performances, and relying on his own voice allowed him to expand on the music without being tied to Darin's original vocal tracks.

"This wasn't about an actor's ego, wanting to get my rocks off by singing in a movie. This was about trying to do something that would honor him as an entertainer," Spacey said. "This is all about Bobby. It's about trying to reintroduce people to his catalog and hoping that this film will ignite a kind of recognition of his body of work that's just been denied too long."

"Beyond the Sea" traces Darin's cloistered childhood, when he was afflicted with rheumatic fever, through his varied recording and acting career, which culminated in an Academy Award nomination for his role in 1963's "Captain Newman, M.D."

A Darin devotee since his teens, Spacey dreamed of mak-

An unusual suspect

Kevin Spacey directs, acts, sings and swings in new Bobby Darin biopic

Kevin Spacey performs during the "Beyond the Sea" tour at Wilmet Theatre in Los Angeles on Dec. 6.

AP

ing "Beyond the Sea" for 12 years. Studios were unwilling to finance a film about a comparatively forgotten singer who died in 1973 at 37 after open-heart surgery.

"Every door slammed in my face," said Spacey, who eventually found overseas financing. "Politely, but every door slammed in my face."

Darin's family also had objections, first, to the film itself, second, to the thought that anyone's voice but Darin's would be used for the soundtrack. Spacey gradually won over Darin's reluctant loved ones, including manager and pal Steve Blauner, played by John Goodman, and son Dodd from his marriage to teen idol Sandra Dee, played by Kate Bosworth.

The film also co-stars Brenda Blethyn as Darin's mother, Caroline Aaron as his sister and Bob Hoskins as his brother-in-law.

Hoskins recalls his initial skepticism when he met with Spacey over dinner to discuss the film.

"He said, 'I'm going to direct it, I'm going to act in it, and I'm going to sing the songs, and I'm doing the dancing.' 'Yeah, you are, are you?'" Hoskins said. "And he said, 'Really, I am.' Well, I thought, if anybody's going to stick their neck out that far, I'm going with them."

Spacey has stuck his neck out before. After a successful early career on stage, Spacey broke into movies but found himself typecast as sleazebag or outright monsters, including the serial killer of "Seven" and a motor-mouthed low-life in "The Usual Suspects."

Kevin Spacey

Consciously trying to reinvent himself, Spacey bulled his way to more varied roles with "L.A. Confidential," "Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil," "The Negotiator," "L.A. Confidential" and "American Beauty," for which he won the best-actor Oscar as an acerbically funny husband in a midlife crisis.

For the foreseeable future, though, Spacey plans to stick largely to the stage.

"I'm going to be a theater rat for a while," Spacey said.

"I'll probably do less movies than plays for the next five, six, seven, eight years."

Spacey took over this year as artistic director of London's Old Vic theatre and plans to star in two plays there in 2005: Dennis McIntyre's "National Anthems" and "The Philadelphia Story," the basis for the classic film comedy starring Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant and James Stewart. Spacey will play Grant's role as a conniving ex-husband.

Spacey shrugs off his artistic misfires, including his recent string of film flops, saying he wants to keep his career focus on the long haul.

"There were a lot of years when people were really crapping on Paul Simon. Whatever happened to Paul Simon? He used to be good," Spacey said. "Then 'Graceland' came out, and everybody was in love with Paul Simon again."

Justice empowered to track war criminals

BY JIM ABRAMS

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Legislation signed by the president Friday gives the Justice Department expanded powers to track down and deport illegal immigrants who were engaged in war crimes and human-rights abuses in their home countries.

The Anti-Atrocity Alien Deportation Act, first introduced in Congress five years ago,

was part of the massive intelligence community overhaul bill that President Bush signed into law.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., who sponsored the legislation in the Senate with Judiciary Committee Chairman Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, said it updated the charter of Justice's Office of Special Investigations, which has been responsible for identifying Nazi war criminals who sought refuge in the country. The new law will allow Justice

to investigate other war criminals as well.

"Now we can pursue the new generations of war criminals and human-rights abusers," Leahy said in a statement.

Rep. Mark Foley, R-Fla., the House sponsor with Rep. Gary Ackerman, D-N.Y., said an estimated 800 to 1,000 war criminals and human-rights abusers seek refuge in the United States every year from such countries as Haiti, Honduras, North Korea, Rwanda and Cuba.

"The United States is currently home to many immigrants who fled torture in their home countries," Foley said in a statement.

"What many people don't know is that their torturers also came here to live."

The measure expands the scope of illegal immigrants subject to deportation and denial of entry to those who have engaged in torture, genocide and religious persecution. The Office of Special Investigations was set up in 1979 to prosecute and remove Nazi-era criminals.

Snail mailers can click and ship

BY RANDOLPH E. SCHMID

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Need a gift card to a restaurant or store?

Want to hear a modern electronic band?

Looking for someone to pick up that holiday parcel from your home?

The Postal Service may not pop to mind in all those cases, but perhaps it is.

"We're innovating... we are trying to change our attitude," Postmaster General John Potter said Thursday in an interview with The Associated Press.

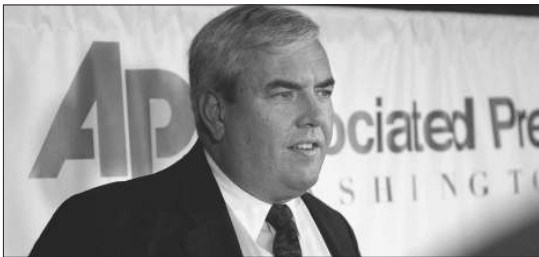
The agency that goes back to Ben Franklin and colonial America is battling to keep its place in electronic America.

"We're embracing the Internet and saying, 'Hey, if that's the way 30-year-olds want to do business, then God bless 'em, we're going to do business where they want to do it and how they want to do it,'" Potter said.

As an example, he cited the rock band formed by two musicians who chose the name "Postal Service" for their group.

In the past, a team of attorneys would have descended, insisting that the band cease and desist using the agency's name. Instead, Potter said, postal officials listened to the music and reached an agreement to permit use of the postal name.

The 30-and-under population is the group most likely to concen-



Postmaster General John Potter says the U.S. Postal Service is embracing the Internet to do business.

trate on electronic communication, Potter said, and this band is one way to get the postal name in front of them.

Need a last-minute gift for a birthday, anniversary, any occasion? The post office is there to help, Potter said.

"You can go online with us, produce a (greeting) card for anyone. If you want to include a gift card... the gift card's right there," he said.

Offerings cover a variety of prices and include a restaurant card that can be used at any restaurant that accepts American Express. Also, specific gift cards can apply to places such as Barnes & Noble bookstores, Romano's Macaroni Grill, Safeway and Vons supermarkets, Lowe's hardware, Chili's, Bed, Bath & Beyond and Starbucks coffee.

Another service allows people to avoid going to the post office to ship their packages.

"You can click and ship," Potter said. "You can produce a label... there is an automatic calculation of postage by weight... you can tell us that you have that package. If you want immediate pick-

up you can pay \$12.50 and a carrier will come out to pick it up. If it can wait until tomorrow, the carrier is coming by your door, tell us that you have it and on the route they'll just pick it up," Potter said.

Potter said the agency is working with what he called e-tailers, which sell through the Internet. Studies have shown that people buy more if they have a catalog to look at instead of just the Internet, he said, "so people who you might never think would have a catalog in the mail do," such as major computer companies and even the online auction site e-Bay.

Potter said he is also looking at ways to cooperate with what are sometimes seen as competitors in the battle for the advertising dollar.

Ad supplements carried in newspapers are one example, he said, with the post office delivering mailed supplements to addresses that do not subscribe to a paper.

In the interview, Potter also said:

■ The post office will keep its promise not to increase rates before 2006. Because it takes nearly

a year to put an increase in place, that means the postal service will probably begin the process in the spring, perhaps in April. A phased increase is a possibility.

■ He is hopeful that Congress will be able to pass legislation to give the agency more flexibility in how it operates. Bills won approval in House and Senate committees this year but stalled.

■ The amount of the planned rate increase will depend on whether that legislation removes the requirement for the post office to place funds in escrow in 2006, tying up \$2.9 billion.

■ First-class mail has been declining while advertising mail increases, a change that alters the finances of the agency. Diversion of bills and payments to the Internet has been part of the problem and some first-class items have been switched to standard rates.

■ The post office is working on installation of sensors to protect workers and the public from anthrax and other biological threats.

The post office will not abandon universal service but would like some flexibility in closing smaller offices, many of which serve fewer than 100 people.

3 die in Fla. crash

DAVENPORT, Fla. — A British tourist visiting central Florida with his family drove a minivan into the path of a gas tanker truck as he headed to a grocery store, killing himself and two other passengers, authorities said. Four children in the minivan also were injured.

The driver, Ayodeji Babson, 40, and his 41-year-old wife, Dawn, both of London, died at the scene early Saturday.

Another passenger, Simeon Cole, died later Saturday after being taken to an Orlando hospital, Coggins said. Cole was 41.

Stun gun used on kid

PEMBROKE PINES, Fla. — Police used a Taser on a 12-year-old boy who attacked another special-needs student, the third time this fall authorities in South Florida have used a stun gun on children.

Police said the student was Tasered on Dec. 10 after he tried to stab another student with a pencil on a school bus, then kicked and threatened an officer.

The boy was charged with several offenses, including aggravated assault and resisting a police officer with violence. He was released from custody.

Pembroke Pines Police Cmdr. David Golt said the officer used the Taser properly.

Fraternity shut down

RALEIGH, N.C. — A college fraternity was shut down because it hazed pledges by forcing them to run naked through fraternity and sorority houses.

Officials of North Carolina State University and the national offices of Sigma Phi Epsilon suspended the N.C. State chapter of Sigma Phi until the fall semester next year.

From The Associated Press

Donors chipping in millions for Bush inauguration

BY MANNY FERNANDEZ

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — More than a dozen wealthy Bush supporters — oil executives, corporate leaders, Texas Republicans — have donated \$250,000 each to help pay for the president's second inauguration, which is shaping up as one of the most expensive.

According to a major donor list on the Presidential Inaugural

Committee's Web site, 14 companies and individuals have given \$250,000, and 10 have contributed \$100,000. The list, which includes all donations made as of Thursday, also shows a contribution of \$25,000 and another of \$50,000.

The \$250,000 donors include former Enron President Richard Kinder, Dell Computer founder Michael Dell and Texas oilman and corporate takeover specialist

T. Boone Pickens.

Also on the \$250,000 list are ExxonMobil Corp., Sallie Mae Inc., a Reston-based company that annually provides billions of dollars in student loans; United Technologies Corp., a unit of which manufactures Army Black Hawk helicopters; the utility Southern Co.; and Stephens Group Inc., a Little Rock venture capital company.

"We've seen a lot of enthusiasm

from people wanting to help make the 55th inaugural a success," said Tracey Schmitt, spokeswoman for the Presidential Inaugural Committee, which coordinates most inaugural activities.

Schmitt said the donations help pay for the venues, vendors, parade-route bleachers, entertainment and other costs associated with staging the Jan. 20 inauguration, as well as lead-up events be-

ginning Jan. 18.

The inauguration is estimated to cost \$30 million to \$40 million, which private donations will cover. The estimate includes security costs not covered by the federal and local governments. Security is expected to be tight for the first inauguration since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

There are two categories of major donors. Sponsors contribute \$100,000, and underwriters donate \$250,000.

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every Saturday to find
Realtors at your new station.

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Horoscope

Mercury dusts off his hands and says, "Enough!" This process of rehearsing and reviewing is getting old already! Yes, looking back has a purpose, but it's about time we figured out what to do with now. It will take three weeks for Mercury to come completely out of the shadow, and this creates the illusion of time stretching.

TODAY'S BIRTHDAY

(December 20). Celebrate your power this year — others take note and give you even more reasons to rejoice. Next month is key in raising your financial status. Ask for money due you or a deserved raise. Your sex appeal is unmistakable this year, and singles have hot dates through the spring. You could wind up with a Scorpio or Cancer.

ARIES (March 21-April 19)

Put in the work required, and you'll shine. Talent and willpower are inextricably woven together. There are no outstanding talents who are not also notoriously disciplined when it comes to honing their craft.

TAURUS (April 20-May 20)

You'll be blessed — and then blessed again — and ... too much of a good thing can be bad for you, making you feel overwhelmed. Be judicious, and know when to pass your bounty on to the next person.

GEMINI (May 21-June 21)

Because of your contagious zest for life, you're the one who can help that person with the defeatist "been there, done that" attitude. It's lucky to extend an invite and then take only "yes" for an answer.

CANCER (June 22-July 22)

Growth is the word of the day. Think of everything as alive — thoughts are alive, energy is alive, and love is alive. What's alive requires breath and food. Feed and oxygenate your relationship with the world.

LEO (July 23-Aug. 22)

Karma zings back in fast motion — you'd have to try hard not to get the mes-

sage. So now you know what you are giving by looking hard and long at what has come back at you. Make adjustments accordingly.

VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22)

You're holding out for the one (job, person, dress sale), and it's the word "wait" is so passive, implying you're twiddling your thumbs until the perfect situation arrives, which, of course, you're not.

LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 23)

Unconsciously, you're looking for ways to reward yourself for work that feels, at the present time, largely unrewarded. While you're at it, you may as well go for big rewards instead of piddly ones like snack food.

SCORPIO (Oct. 24-Nov. 21)

The brimming excitement of the season is getting to you — you're all swept up and ready to give, give, give. Or should I say, spend, spend, spend? You can do the first without overdoing the latter.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22-Dec. 21)

Someone seems to have cast a spell on you, as you're moving through the day in an enchanted haze. Then again, this seeing reality through a magical fog is kind of nice. Enjoy it while it lasts.

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22-Jan. 19)

Some people resent being stuck between a rock and a hard place, but you wisely realize that this usually means there's nowhere to go but up! Ask for a lifeline, and helicopter your way out of a tough situation.

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20-Feb. 18)

Nothing breaks up monotony like the warm feelings you get around good, solid people. Sensational news on the social front is featured — when friends have something to celebrate, you have to, too.

PISCES (Feb. 19-March 20)

Life is like a jazz trio. When you're given the opportunity to solo, play your heart out! A shameless self-promoter has something to teach you. Take this lesson all the way to the bank.

Creators Syndicate

Holiday Mathis



Calvin and Hobbes



Jump Start



Zits



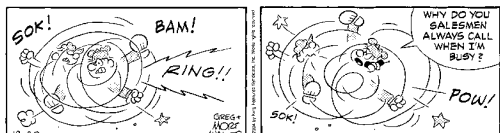
Cathy



Hi and Lois



Beetle Bailey



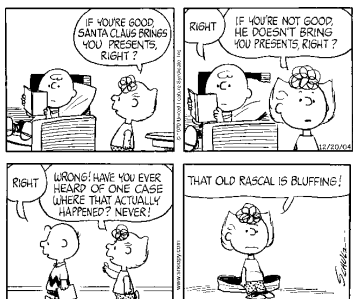
Red Rover



Better or Worse



Peanuts



Fotrot



B.C.



Baby Blues



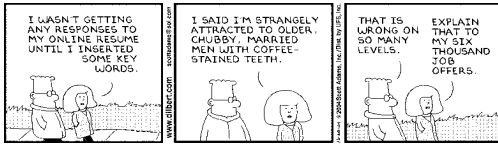
Spider Man



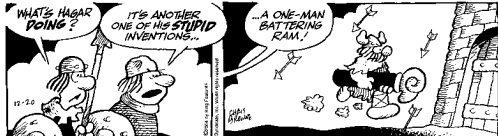
Blondie



Dilbert



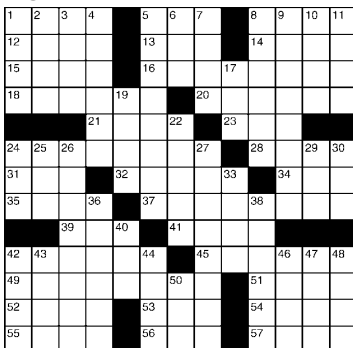
Hagar



Garfield



Eugene Sheffer Crossword



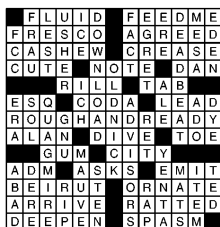
Across

- 1 Counterfeit
- 5 Bankroll
- 8 Spill the beans
- 12 South American city
- 14 Anger
- 15 Somewhere out there
- 16 Home
- 18 Handgun
- 20 Deflate, in a sense
- 21 Play area
- 23 People in general
- 24 Home
- 28 Pleasant
- 31 Computer button
- 32 Non-native Hawaiian
- 34 Year-end beverage
- 35 Campus bigwig
- 37 Home
- 39 Blythe cream quantity
- 41 Jodie Foster movie
- 42 Vinegary
- 45 Proverbs preceders
- 49 Home
- 51 Carriage
- 52 Hodgepodge
- 53 Pitch
- 54 Largest of the seven
- 55 Ollie's pal
- 56 Dash lengths
- 57 Crooned

Down

- 1 Rebuff a masher
- 2 Stereo arrangement
- 3 Latin 101 word
- 4 Constant sufferer
- 5 Literate and informed
- 6 Past
- 7 Extinct bird
- 8 Londoner or Liverpoolian
- 9 Pasta variety (Var.)
- 10 Kelp, e.g.
- 11 Harry's first lady
- 17 Fellow
- 19 Solemn pledge
- 22 Overwhelm
- 24 Proof abbr.
- 25 Exploit
- 26 Collegiate community
- 27 Unexpected hits
- 29 Anti
- 30 34-Across ingredient
- 33 Right angles
- 36 Country
- 38 Peruvian pack
- 40 Pen name
- 42 Commotions
- 43 Future stallion
- 44 Give as an example
- 46 Sax-playing Simpson
- 47 Chow
- 48 Unforeseen hangup
- 50 Felon's flight

Answer to Previous Puzzle



12-20

CRYPTOQUIP

A Q E Q S M N R U A T Z ' T
V E P X C E Z X C S , S X G M X G V F
O C X P E P V S T E S Z N R C R A T

M X U O X G Q F A Q Z R C R T Z .
Saturday's Cryptoquip: IF THERE'S
SOMETHING YOU DON'T WANT MOTHER TO
FIND OUT, DO YOU SAY "MOM'S THE WORD"?
Today's Cryptoquip Clue: Q equals N



U.S. Army Spc. Jason Baldwin, center, of Rochelle, Ill., who was wounded in action, stands with other military personnel honoring the flag prior to the start of the game between the Dallas Mavericks and the Atlanta Hawks on Saturday night in Dallas. Nearly 140 season-ticket holders donated their front row tickets so the soldiers could enjoy the game. The Mavericks defeated the Hawks 90-68.

Mavs' stiff defense too much for Hawks

BY JAIME ARON
The Associated Press

DALLAS — The Dallas Mavericks got instant results from a two-day crash course in defense. Then again, it helped that they were playing the Atlanta Hawks. The Hawks matched a franchise-low by scoring 28 points in the first half and the Mavericks wound up tying a franchise low for points allowed in a game in a 90-68 victory Saturday night.

"It was what I expected after a couple days of practice," Dallas coach Don Nelson said.

Dirk Nowitzki led Dallas with 15 points and 12 rebounds, despite losing his front teeth. His gritty performance was fitting considering 137 U.S. soldiers

wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan sat in front-row seats.

The soldiers from Brooke Army Medical Center near San Antonio were flown in as part of a thank-you campaign thought up by a season-ticket holder, with more than \$150,000 in court-side seats donated by fellow season-ticket holders. The soldiers — all wearing matching T-shirts and many with their injuries quite apparent — received a standing ovation after the first quarter.

Nowitzki was hit in the mouth by teammate Jason Terry and Atlanta's Jason Collier while going for a rebound a few minutes in.

He returned late in the first quarter without the dental bridge that comprises most of his top teeth. He had it put back in at halftime with a cream a team employee bought at a drug store during the first half.

"I was lucky enough that my dentist was actually at the game," Nowitzki said. "He came in and fixed it real quick. I've got to go back and see him [Sunday]."

Nowitzki played 32 minutes, making five of 12 shots and uncharacteristically missing five of 10 foul shots. It hardly mattered, though, because of how poorly the Hawks played.

Atlanta opened with seven straight misses and made just one of its first 15 shots. The Hawks didn't get a basket from a starter until there was 1:23 left in the first quarter and they finished the period with just 12 points. They had 16 in the second quarter, getting the last two on foul shots with 0.5 seconds left, giving them just 28 at halftime for the fourth time in franchise history.

Their 68 points set a season low for the second time in three games; they had 69 against Houston on Wednesday. Atlanta shot just 33 percent in losing its fifth straight, keeping the Hawks stuck at four wins, second worst in the NBA.

"The first and second quarters were a disaster offensively," coach Mike Woodson said. "We just couldn't make our shots. We lost our confidence a little bit shooting the ball."



Forward Dirk Nowitzki led the Mavericks with 15 points and 12 rebounds despite having a dental bridge knocked out in the first quarter of Saturday's victory.

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Shell interested in Raiders' vacancy

The Associated Press

MIAMI — Former Oakland Raiders coach Art Shell is interested in the Miami Dolphins' job, possibly joining LSU coach Nick Saban as a candidate, an NFL source with knowledge of the job search said Saturday.

Shell might receive an offer of anonymity, the source said on condition of anonymity.

Sports briefs

By interviewing Shell, the NFL's senior vice president for football operations, Miami would comply with a league requirement that teams interview a minority candidate for any coaching vacancy.

Shell became the first black coach of the modern era in 1989 with the Raiders, but he hasn't been a head coach since 1994.

Dolphins interim coach Jim Bates is also expected to interview for the job. Preparing his team to play the New England Patriots, Bates said he advised management he wants to wait until after the game to discuss plans for an interview.

"I told them I didn't want anything to distract me from Monday night's game," Bates said.

Saban, the only coach the Dolphins have confirmed is a candidate, said he has had no contact with Miami since interviewing Tuesday with owner Wayne Huizenga and president Eddie Jones in Baton Rouge, La.

If offered the Dolphins job, Saban said, his decision won't be easy.

"It's especially difficult when you have such a good job that you enjoy so much, and have a tremendous amount of gratitude for the opportunity to continue to have success here because of the tremendous support," he said.

In five seasons at Louisiana

State, Saban has won two Southwestern Conference titles and the 2003 BCS national championship. He's preparing LSU for a game against Iowa in the Capital One Bowl on Jan. 1 in Orlando, and his possible departure has alarmed Tigers fans.

The Dolphins declined to comment Saturday on their search.

Saban has been considered the favorite for the job ever since coach Dave Wannstedt resigned last month after Miami started the season 1-8.

Shell, a Hall of Fame offensive tackle, played for the Oakland-Los Angeles Raiders from 1968-82 and had a 56-41 record coaching the Raiders from 1989-94. He led them to three playoff berths and to the AFC title game in 1991.

Grandi wins first Cup GS

ALTA BADIA, Italy — Canada's Thomas Grandi won a giant slalom Sunday for his first World Cup victory in his 12 seasons on the circuit.

Austria's Benjamin Raich was second and Switzerland's Didier Cuche and Austria's Hermann Maier shared third.

Bode Miller missed a gate and did not finish his second run, reducing the American's lead in the overall standings. Winner of six of 13 races this season, Miller still holds a 798-479 points lead over Maier.

Miller said he skied over a rock during his first run and was in 20th place, perhaps causing him to be too aggressive in the second run.

Grandi became the first Canadian to win a World Cup race since Cary Muller at Aspen, Colo., in 1994. Grandi was second after the first run. He covered the steep and twisting Gran Risa course in a two-run time of 2 minutes, 34.23 seconds.

Judges go Johnson's way in bout with Tarver

By JOHN NADEL

The Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Glen Johnson knows what it's like to put his fate in the hands of boxing judges and have decisions go against him.

So, he was prepared for the worst Saturday night. He got the best.

Johnson, a virtual unknown until knocking out Roy Jones Jr., three months ago, won a split decision over Antonio Tarver in a matchup of the world's best light heavyweights.

"My heart was beating real fast," he said with a smile when asked if he was concerned about the outcome. "I came out ahead, which doesn't happen too often. I'm just thankful."

The Staples Center crowd cheered throughout the final round, and when it ended, both fighters thrust their fists into the air, proclaiming victory.

The winner proved to be Johnson, who overcame Tarver's 4-inch height advantage to win, mainly by being the aggressor through most of the 12-round bout.

The 35-year-old Johnson raised his record to 42-9-2 with 28 knockouts. He didn't begin to box until he was 20, and turned professional three years later.

Johnson won his first 32 professional fights but was 9-9-2 in his most recent 20 before Saturday night. He thought he was one of those that he lost, but the judges involved ruled otherwise.

"I fought my best fight, the outcome is what it is," he said.

Judges Melvina Martinez and Chuck Giampa scored the bout 115-113 in favor of Johnson. Judge Marty Denkin had it 115-112 for Tarver.

The Associated Press scored it 115-113 for Tarver.

The 6-foot-2½ Tarver, a tall, lanky fighter, said he won by dictating the pace and throwing the harder punches.

"I could have gone either way. I closed strong," Tarver said.

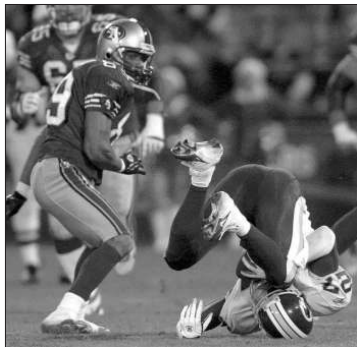
Lathan and Giampa didn't think so, with each giving Johnson the final three rounds.

Tarver, a southpaw, said he injured his left hand when he hit Johnson in the fourth or fifth round.

"My best weapon was taken away from me," he said.

"That's boxing. It's a tough sport, man. We both fought like warriors. We prepared for the best Glen Johnson. He's proven to be a worthy champion. Tonight's his night."

"We'll be back. That's the mark of a champion — if you can come back from defeat. We all know I can. Congratulations to Glen."



CONTRA COSTA TIMES/KRT

Washington Redskins Walt Harris comes up with a fourth quarter interception as intended 49ers receiver Curtis Conway watches.

Skins capitalize on 49ers' errors

By GREG BEACHAM

The Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Antonio Pierce found out just how easy it has become to beat the San Francisco 49ers: Simply stand in one place and allow their mistakes to find you.

The Washington linebacker got his first NFL touchdown on an interception thrown by Ken Dorsey, who hit Pierce between the numbers 18 and 19ers' territory with 48 seconds left in the first half.

Pierce returned it 78 yards for a score in a 26-16 victory on Saturday. Though the Redskins committed many of the same penalties, mistakes and lapses that have plagued their season, he realized Washington's problems pale in comparison to San Francisco's woes.

"San Francisco, they're going to improve in the future, but we felt this was a game we should have, no excuses," said Pierce, who had the biggest of Washington's four interceptions. "It was 78 yards to the end zone? I knew there was a reason I was tired."

Patrick Ramsey passed for 214 yards and a touchdown, Clinton Portis rushed for 110 yards and Rod Gardner caught six passes for 111 yards — but the Redskins (5-9) were disappointed in their offense, which scored its only touchdown on the opening drive.

"We had an opportunity to lose that game if our defense didn't play so well," Ramsey said. "The offense is contributing more, but not as much as we would like. We've just got to get the ball in the end zone."

Washington also committed 11 penalties for 93 yards to stay in pace to break the franchise record. Without newcomer Jeff Chandler, who kicked four field

goals, the Redskins' task would have been much tougher.

But when teams face San Francisco (2-12), they've got plenty of margin for all sorts of errors.

"The thing that I am proudest of is just the way they fight," coach Joe Gibbs said. "I think our guys fight hard every week, and sometimes things are not that pretty. We just fought and played hard."

The Redskins took a 19-point lead late in the first half, and the sturdy defense shut out the Niners' offense for more than 45 minutes between Brandon Lloyd's early TD catch and Curtis Conway's scoring grab with 4:26 left. Dorsey, making his fifth start in place of injured Tim Rattay, doubled his interception total for the season, including three in the first half. He finished 20-for-38 for 206 yards, but the 49ers remained on track for the top draft pick with more of the bland offense and step-slow defense that has defined their season.

"Defensively, time after time after time, we kept ourselves in the football game," 49ers coach Dennis Erickson said. "We just didn't make the plays we needed to, throwing the football."

With season-ending losses to Buffalo and New England, San Francisco could match the worst records in franchise history, set in 1978 and 1979.

"Two very costly decisions, that's how I sum up this game," Dorsey said, referring to two of his first-half interceptions. "At the end of the half, you've got to get at least three points out of that. That's all things you've got to learn from and make sure don't happen again."

Star linebacker LaVar Arington returned to the Redskins' lineup after missing 11 weeks with a knee injury.



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Steelers, Roethlisberger keeping straight ahead

BY TOM CANAVAN
The Associated Press

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. — The main thing separating Ben Roethlisberger and Eli Manning on Saturday was the Pittsburgh Steelers' rookie quarterback made his biggest plays with the game on the line.

Roethlisberger threw for a season-high 316 yards and hit four straight passes to set up Jerome Bettis' game-winning 1-yard run with 4:57 to go, leading the Pittsburgh Steelers to a 33-30 win over the New York Giants.

"I am amazed, but he is an awesome quarterback," receiver Antwan Randle El said after Roethlisberger led the Steelers (13-1) to a team-record 12th straight win and handed the Giants (5-9) a seventh straight loss.

"He might have a long way to go, but he has this great poise," said Randle El, who caught five passes for 149 yards and a TD and also threw his first career TD. "You can have all the ability in the world, but if you don't have the poise to do it, it won't happen."

Roethlisberger, who has not lost in 25 straight college and pro starts, showed his poise in moving the Steelers from their 33 to the New York 8 yard line. Tiki Barber's 1-yard run had given New York a 30-26 lead.

"He has been making good decisions with games on the line," coach Bill Cowher said of the 11th pick in the NFL Draft. "In the fourth quarter, he has a feel for the game and an understanding of the game, and he manages it well."

Until Saturday, Manning has struggled in losing his first four starts. The No. 1 pick in the draft was horrible in his past two games and seemingly had lost his confidence.

Using a game plan filled with plays he liked, Manning found himself against the NFL's top-ranked defense. He threw two touchdown passes and set up Barber's go-ahead touchdown with three completions of 15 yards or more.

"I had fun because we were getting some stuff done," said Man-



Steelers receiver Antwan Randle El (82) runs away from Giants cornerback Will Allen after a reception in the first half. Each of his receptions in the first half went for more than 30 yards, including a 35-yard TD.

ning, who completed 16 of 23 for 182 yards. "We were making plays, running the ball, the line was protecting, receivers were making catches. We got in a rhythm, and it was back to playing football again. It was a good feeling."

Roethlisberger hit five passes of 34 or more yards in a much-hyped matchup with Manning, who only had one longer than 20 yards.

The two talked before the game and they congratulated each other after it was over.

"I don't ever want to remember what it is like to lose," said Roethlisberger, who also threw two interceptions.

Randle El caught a 35-yard touchdown pass and threw a 10-yard shovel pass to Verron Haynes for a touchdown. Jeff Reed kicked four field goals. Hines Ward had nine catches for 134 yards despite finishing the game with a hip pointer and Bettis ran for 140 yards for the Steelers.

Manning threw touchdown passes of 2 yards to Jeremy Shockey and 1 yard to Marcellus Rivers. He also hit Amari Tomer with two 17-yard passes and he added a 15-yarder to the Hilliard to set up Barber's go-ahead TD run.

Manning was sacked on a 2-point conversion attempt.

Roethlisberger then sandwiched passes of 9 and 11 yards to Ward around a dump off to Bettis before hitting Randle El for 36 yards to the Giants 8. Three straight runs by Bettis got the ball in the end zone.

Willie Williams picked off a dropped ball to a tripped Tomer on the next series, and the Steelers ran out the clock.

Giants receiver Willie Ponder took the opening kickoff 91 yards for a score. It was the Giants' first game-opening kickoff return for a touchdown in a regular-season home game in their 80-year history.

The Steelers used trickery to tie the game with Randle El making the shovel pass after taking a lateral from Roethlisberger.

Alge Crumpler fumbled that chance away at Carolina 22. Artrell Hawkins knocked the ball away and Dan Morgan recovered.

The Panthers quickly drove for their first lead of the night. Delhomme's 43-yard pass to Keary Colbert was the big play, and Nick Goings ran 5 yards for a touchdown with 3:37 left in the fourth quarter.

That was enough time for Vick and the Falcons to make a comeback of their own.

NFL scoreboard

American Conference

East	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
N.Y. Jets	12	0	0	.923	355	217
N.Y. Giants	9	4	0	.692	260	283
Indianapolis	10	4	0	.714	259	231
Miami	2	11	0	.154	113	289

South	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Indianapolis	10	4	0	.714	259	231
Houston	5	8	0	.385	159	212
Tennessee	5	8	0	.385	159	212

North	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Pittsburgh	13	0	0	.923	323	220
Baltimore	8	5	0	.615	270	295
Cincinnati	9	4	0	.692	260	283
Cleveland	3	10	0	.231	247	345

West	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
San Diego	10	4	0	.714	259	231
San Francisco	9	5	0	.643	234	273
Kansas City	9	5	0	.643	234	273
Oakland	5	8	0	.385	159	212

East	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Philadelphia	5	8	0	.385	159	212
Dallas	5	8	0	.385	159	212
N.Y. Giants	5	8	0	.385	159	212
Washington	5	8	0	.385	159	212

South	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Atlanta	11	3	0	.786	301	283
Carolina	10	4	0	.714	259	231
Tampa Bay	9	5	0	.643	234	273
New Orleans	5	8	0	.385	159	212

North	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Green Bay	5	8	0	.385	159	212
Minnesota	5	8	0	.385	159	212
Chicago	5	8	0	.385	159	212

West	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Seattle	6	6	0	.500	230	289
St. Louis	6	6	0	.500	230	289
Arizona	2	10	0	.154	113	289
San Francisco	2	10	0	.154	113	289

East	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Philadelphia	5	8	0	.385	159	212
Dallas	5	8	0	.385	159	212
N.Y. Jets	5	8	0	.385	159	212
Washington	5	8	0	.385	159	212

South	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Atlanta	11	3	0	.786	301	283
Carolina	10	4	0	.714	259	231
Tampa Bay	9	5	0	.643	234	273
New Orleans	5	8	0	.385	159	212

North	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Green Bay	5	8	0	.385	159	212
Minnesota	5	8	0	.385	159	212
Chicago	5	8	0	.385	159	212

West	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Seattle	6	6	0	.500	230	289
St. Louis	6	6	0	.500	230	289
Arizona	2	10	0	.154	113	289
San Francisco	2	10	0	.154	113	289

East	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Philadelphia	5	8	0	.385	159	212
Dallas	5	8	0	.385	159	212
N.Y. Jets	5	8	0	.385	159	212
Washington	5	8	0	.385	159	212

South	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Atlanta	11	3	0	.786	301	283
Carolina	10	4	0	.714	259	231
Tampa Bay	9	5	0	.643	234	273
New Orleans	5	8	0	.385	159	212

North	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Green Bay	5	8	0	.385	159	212
Minnesota	5	8	0	.385	159	212
Chicago	5	8	0	.385	159	212

West	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Seattle	6	6	0	.500	230	289
St. Louis	6	6	0	.500	230	289
Arizona	2	10	0	.154	113	289
San Francisco	2	10	0	.154	113	289

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Rushing—Pittsburgh	13	0	0	.923	323	220
Passing—Pittsburgh	13	0	0	.923	323	220
Receiving—Pittsburgh	13	0	0	.923	323	220
Defensive—Pittsburgh	13	0	0	.923	323	220
Offensive—Pittsburgh	13	0	0	.923	323	220

Redskins 26, 49ers 16	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Washington	7	16	0	.308	166	266
San Francisco	7	16	0	.308	166	266

Second Quarter	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Was.—FG Chandler 49, 16:45.	1	0	0	.100	3	0
Was.—FG Chandler 26, 8:28.	2	0	0	.200	6	0
Was.—FG Chandler 20, 4:10.	3	0	0	.300	9	0

Third Quarter	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Was.—FG Chandler 26, 8:28.	4	0	0	.400	12	0
Was.—FG Chandler 20, 4:10.	5	0	0	.500	15	0
Was.—FG Chandler 16, 1:11.	6	0	0	.600	18	0

Fourth Quarter	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Was.—FG Chandler 26, 8:28.	7	0	0	.700	21	0
Was.—FG Chandler 20, 4:10.	8	0	0	.800	24	0
Was.—FG Chandler 16, 1:11.	9	0	0	.900	27	0

First downs	Was	SF
Was.—FG Chandler 49, 16:45.	1	0
Was.—FG Chandler 26, 8:28.	2	0
Was.—FG Chandler 20, 4:10.	3	0
Was.—FG Chandler 16, 1:11.	4	0

Individual Statistics	Was	SF
Rushing—Washington	13	0
Passing—Washington	13	0
Receiving—Washington	13	0
Defensive—Washington	13	0
Offensive—Washington	13	0

Falcons 34, Panthers 31 (OT)	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Atlanta	9	0	0	.900	316	244
Carolina	9	0	0	.900	316	244

First Quarter	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Atl.—finer 3 p's from Vick (feely kick), 7:31.	1	0	0	.100	3	0
Atl.—FG Feely 37, 14:11.	2	0	0	.200	6	0
Atl.—FG Feely 37, 14:11.	3	0	0	.300	9	0

Second Quarter	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Atl.—Dum 6, 11 p's from Vick (feely kick), 12:21.	4	0	0	.400	12	0
Atl.—FG Feely 37, 14:11.	5	0	0	.500	15	0
Atl.—FG Feely 37, 14:11.	6	0	0	.600	18	0

Third Quarter	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Atl.—Dum 6, 11 p's from Vick (feely kick), 12:21.	7	0	0	.700	21	0
Atl.—FG Feely 37, 14:11.	8	0	0	.800	24	0
Atl.—FG Feely 37, 14:11.	9	0	0	.900	27	0

Fourth Quarter	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Atl.—Dum 6, 11 p's from Vick (feely kick), 12:21.	10	0	0	1.000	30	0
Atl.—FG Feely 37, 14:11.	11	0	0	1.000	33	0
Atl.—FG Feely 37, 14:11.	12	0	0	1.000	36	0

First downs	Atl	Car
Atl.—Dum 6, 11 p's from Vick (feely kick), 12:21.	1	0
Atl.—FG Feely 37, 14:11.	2	0
Atl.—FG Feely 37, 14:11.	3	0
Atl.—FG Feely 37, 14:11.	4	0

Individual Statistics	Atl	Car
Rushing—Atlanta	13	0
Passing—Atlanta	13	0
Receiving—Atlanta	13	0
Defensive—Atlanta	13	0
Offensive—Atlanta	13	0

First downs	Atl	Car
Atl.—Dum 6, 11 p's from Vick (feely kick), 12:21.	1	0
Atl.—FG Feely 37, 14:11.	2	0
Atl.—FG Feely 37, 14:11.	3	0
Atl.—FG Feely 37, 14:11.	4	0

Individual Statistics	Atl	Car
Rushing—Atlanta	13	0
Passing—Atlanta	13	0
Receiving—Atlanta	13	0
Defensive—Atlanta	13	0
Offensive—Atlanta	13	0

Vick: Turnovers costly for Panthers

VICK, FROM BACK PAGE

Delhomme was 24-for-35 for 340 yards, but he had two big fumbles and the game-deciding interception. Muhsin Muhammad had 10 receptions for 135 yards.

The Falcons jumped to a 10-0 lead, only to have the Panthers tie it up before halftime. Atlanta seemed to be in control after scoring on its first two possessions of the second half, but the Panthers responded with three straight TDs in the fourth quarter.

Kris Mangum caught an

11-yard touchdown pass from Delhomme, then Julius Peppers stunned Vick with a 60-yard fumble return for a touchdown.

Brenton Buckner knocked the ball away from Vick, and Peppers grabbed it out of the air with one hand, spinning the other way without being touched to tie it up with 10:09 remaining.

The Falcons regained the momentum with some trickery on the ensuing kickoff. Allen Rossum flipped a lateral pass to DeAngelo Hall, who went 48 yards before being shoved out of

bounds. Alge Crumpler fumbled that chance away at Carolina 22. Artrell Hawkins knocked the ball away and Dan Morgan recovered.

The Panthers quickly drove for their first lead of the night. Delhomme's 43-yard pass to Keary Colbert was the big play, and Nick Goings ran 5 yards for a touchdown with 3:37 left in the fourth quarter.

That was enough time for Vick and the Falcons to make a comeback of their own.

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Players added to proposed Johnson deal

From wire reports

NEW YORK — The megadeal involving Randy Johnson, Shawn Green and Javier Vazquez grew to 10 players Saturday, with the New York Yankees, Arizona and the Los Angeles hoping to present the proposed trade to the commissioner's office soon for approval.

Pitchers Kaz Ishii, Mike Kopechne and Brandon Wood are now part of the deal, a baseball official told The Associated Press on condition of anonymity.

The teams were aiming to put the whole deal down on paper this weekend and give it to the commissioner's office perhaps by Monday.

The deal needs permission because it involves more than \$1 million — as it stands, the Yankees would pay \$2 million of Ishii's contract.

Plus, there might be a spinoff to the deal. There's speculation the Dodgers might get Vazquez from the Yankees and then trade the pitcher to the Chicago White Sox. Johnson remains the centerpiece of the trade, with the Yankees trying to get the five-time Cy Young winner from Arizona. New York also would acquire Ishii, a left-hander who went 13-8 with a 4.71 ERA for Los Angeles last season.

Johnson has a no-trade clause, but wants to play for the Yankees. Green also has a no-trade provision, and the Dodgers outfielder has not yet waived it to play for Arizona.

The Diamondbacks might be able to get Green to come to the desert, though — his former agent, Jeff Moorad, is Arizona's new chief executive officer.

If the deal goes to the commissioner's office, the Yankees plan to ask for a 72-hour window to negotiate a contract extension with Johnson. The 41-year-old lefty is owed \$16 million in the last year of his contract.

Green might use that same time frame to see if he can work an extension with the Diamond-



Though talks stalled several weeks ago, GM Omar Minaya's visit to the Dominican Republic indicates the New York Mets may be renewing their efforts to acquire Sammy Sosa, above.

Mets GM Minaya travels to Dominican to visit Sosa

Sammy Sosa renewed his vows with wife, Sonia, on Saturday in the Dominican Republic. Mets General Manager Omar Minaya attended the religious service, and appears to be renewing his efforts to obtain the slugger.

Privately, Mets insiders say their differences with the Cubs on finances were like "night and day" when talks stalled several weeks ago, and that with no other serious suitors and Sosa's recently diminished production, Chicago brass will need to have a financial before any deal can be consummated. One team official said the team had "cooled" on Sosa. Yet Minaya "poked at length" at Thursday's news conference in Flushing to introduce Pedro Martinez about his ambition to make the Mets omnipresent in the Dominican Republic, the organization every prospect there dreams about. Adding Sosa certainly fits that goal.

Minaya also revealed that several players under contract to other teams have contacted him since Martinez committed to the Mets. It wouldn't be farfetched to presume Sosa was among them, given his desire to leave Chicago and his relationship with Minaya, which dates back to the 1980s with the Rangers.

Athletics trade LHP Mulder to Cards for three prospects

By JANIE MCCAULEY

The Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — The Oakland Athletics traded their second top starter in three days, sending left-hander Mark Mulder to the National League champion St. Louis Cardinals on Saturday for a package of prospects.

Mulder follows Tim Hudson out of town, leaving Barry Zito as the only remaining member of Oakland's vaunted "Big Three" pitchers.

Hudson was dealt to Atlanta on Thursday for three mostly unproven players.

Mulder could be the top-notch pitcher the Cardinals sorely lacked when they got swept by the Boston Red Sox in the World Series, but it's if he's healthy. In return, the A's acquired pitchers Danny Haren and Kiko Calero and minor league catcher Daric Barton.

"We're extremely excited to have obtained a pitcher of Mark's caliber," Cardinals General Manager Walt Jocketty said. "He is the top of the rotation-type pitcher we've been working hard to obtain this offseason. It was difficult to part with the three players we traded but to acquire someone like Mulder we felt that this deal worked for us in several ways."

Mulder replaces Woody Williams, who was not offered salary arbitration by the Cardinals and signed a free-agent deal earlier this month with San Diego. Mulder will join Chris Carpenter, Jason Marquis, Jeff Suppan and Matt Morris in a rotation where all five pitchers won at least 15 games last season. Morris might not be available until May after going under offseason shoulder surgery.



Mark Mulder was the second top starter to be traded by the Oakland Athletics in three days.

Mulder might have some health questions of his own, especially after his perplexing finish to last season.

The 6-foot-6 lefty, the AL starter in the All-Star Game, seemed destined for Cy Young award consideration midway through the season, but went winless in his last seven starts — 0-4 with a 7.27 ERA.

On Aug. 24, he became the first 17-game winner in the majors, then didn't win again. There was speculation he was hurt and not telling anyone.

Mulder missed the end of the 2003 season with a stress fracture in his right leg near the hip, then pitched a team-high 225½ innings.

He repeatedly claimed to be healthy despite a drop in his velocity late in the year. Manager Ken Macha said the day after the sea-

son Mulder probably did become worn down by his heavy work load.

Mulder (17-8) pitched so poorly during the playoff push, the A's briefly considered skipping his turn and using September callup Joe Blanton during the final week-end against Anaheim. Mulder did get the call, but was knocked out after two innings, his shortest outing of the season — and the A's wound up missing the playoffs for the first time in five years.

He was drafted second overall by the A's in 1998 and was signed through the 2005 season with a club option to return in 2006.

After Hudson was swapped to the Braves, the news of Mulder's departure was even more shocking. At least in Hudson's case, it had been rumors swirling.

"What you've got to be kidding me," outfielder Eric Byrnes said of Mulder being traded. "Wow. I don't know what to tell you."

Haren, a 24-year-old right-hander, was 3-3 with a 4.50 ERA in 14 games, including five starts, in three starts with the Cardinals last season.

Calero went 3-1 with two saves and a 2.78 ERA in 14 relief appearances for St. Louis in 2004, allowing a 176-on-base batting average.

Barton was the Cardinals' first-round pick (28th overall) in 2003. He spent last season at Single-A Peoria, where he batted .313 with 13 home runs and 77 RBIs.

Williams was the first major league trade between the clubs since the A's dealt Mark McGwire to St. Louis on July 31, 1997, for T.J. Lincecum and minor league pitchers Blake Stein and Eric Ludwick.

AP Sports Writer R.B. Falstrom contributed to this story.

DC mayor Williams staking career on saving Washington baseball deal

By BRETT ZONGKER

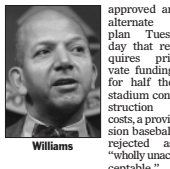
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Mayor Anthony A. Williams is staking his political career on whether his plan to bring Major League Baseball to the nation's capital is approved in the next two weeks.

Mayors are elected to lead and not live "a mirror and just reflect what people are saying," Williams said on "Fox News Sunday with Chris Wallace."

"Ten, 20 percent of the time you're elected to do what you think is in the best interests of the city," Williams said. "If people don't agree with that they can throw you out next time. And I think this is one of those issues."

The city's deal to transform the Montreal Expos into the Washington Nationals and build a \$440 million stadium along the Anacostia River waterfront has a Dec. 31 deadline with baseball owners. The District of Columbia Council



Williams

Williams is planning to meet with Council Chairman Linda W. Crapp on Monday to try to sort out a compromise that could include private financing as well as guarantees for baseball. City officials are trying to arrange a meeting with baseball as well, he said.

"I actually am somewhat hopeful and optimistic that we can work something out," Williams said.

Williams defended his stadium

funding plan, saying it is "publicly important" as the city is involved in it, but it's really private, in that the largest businesses of the city have stood up voluntarily "to pay a special tax to help build the stadium."

Critics have said the deal for publicly financed bonds is one of the most generous they have ever seen for Major League Baseball.

Cropp said she is willing to call a special council session during the holidays to come up with an agreement, but baseball was not yet on the agenda Sunday for the final scheduled meeting of the year on Dec. 21, said Mark Johnson, a spokesman for Cropp. The mayor and members of the D.C. Council are invited to participate in a town hall meeting on the issue Monday night, organized by a pro-baseball group. About 100 students are expected to attend, representing both sides of the issue, the group said.

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No. 2 Kansas holds off Gamecocks

The Associated Press

LAWRENCE, Kan. — Russell Robinson scored four points in the final 36 seconds, allowing No. 2 Kansas to escape with a 64-60 victory over South Carolina Saturday night in a game in which the Gamecocks led most of the way.

South Carolina (5-2), a 17-point underdog in its first road game, came out with a full-court pressure defense and seized an 11-0 lead over the fumble-fingered Jayhawks.

Kansas (7-0) committed five turnovers and had a shot blocked in its first six possessions and didn't get its first lead until Keith Langford fed Christian Moody inside to make it 54-52 with 5:03 to go.

Wayne Simien had 20 points and 11 rebounds for Kansas, despite leaving the game for about 5 minutes in the second half after injuring his right thumb. He returned with the thumb heavily taped.

No. 6 Wake Forest 89, No. 14 Texas 88: At Winston-Salem, N.C., Chris Paul had 23 points and 12 assists and Eric Williams added 19 points, helping Wake Forest (9-1) hold off Texas (7-2).

Kenton Paulino missed an 18-foot jumper just before the buzzer that would have won it for the Longhorns.

No. 7 Duke 78, Oklahoma 67: At New York, J.J. Redick had 19 of his 26 points in the second half and Daniel Ewing had 12 of his 17 after halftime, leading Duke's comeback.

The Blue Devils, who trailed 39-29 at halftime, are 8-0 for the fourth time in five seasons.

No. 8 Syracuse 74, Drexel 54: At Syracuse, N.Y., Hakim Warlick scored 21 points and Darryl



Drexel's Jeremiah King is thoroughly fouled by Syracuse's Craig Fothergill during the first half of the eighth-ranked Orange's 74-54 victory.

Watkins had 14 points and 13 rebounds for Syracuse (9-1). The Orange went their second straight after a loss to No. 4 Oklahoma State and did it by dominating the boards against Drexel (3-4).

No. 9 Kentucky 60, No. 13 Louisville 58: At Louisville, Patrick Sparks made three free throws with 6 seconds left to cap his 25-point performance and complete a comeback from a 16-point deficit by Kentucky (7-1). Louisville (6-2) went ahead 58-57 on Larry O'Bannon's two free throws with 15 seconds left.

No. 10 Pittsburgh 73, Coppin St. 42: At Pittsburgh, Chris Taft scored 18 points and grabbed 11 rebounds for Pittsburgh (8-0). Carl Krauser added 17 points for the Panthers.

No. 15 Arizona 48, Marquette 43: At Milwaukee, with leading

scorer Salim Stoudamire benched, Arizona (7-2) relied on Chris Rodgers' 16 points and key late layup to beat Marquette (9-1). It was the Arizona's lowest scoring output in nearly 20 years.

No. 16 Iowa 88, W. Carolina 75: At Iowa City, Iowa, Jeff Horner scored 17 of his 20 points in the second half, almost single-handedly breaking open what had been a tight game.

Iowa (9-1) had only seven after a sloppy first half, and Western Carolina (5-7) hung around for a while in the second half before Horner took over.

No. 17 Alabama 87, Tennessee St. 79: At Tuscaloosa, Ala., Chuck Davis scored 24 points, grabbed 12 rebounds and blocked seven shots to lead Alabama.

Alabama (9-1) never trailed in the game and led by as many as

25 points in the second half before Tennessee State rallied late, mostly against reserves.

Kennedy Winston scored 19 points for Alabama, while Earnest Shelton had 15.

No. 19 George Washington 85, Towson 69: At Washington, D.C., Pops Mensah-Bonsu scored 15 points and Ricky Lucas added 13 of his season-high 14 points in the second half to help George Washington (7-1) win its seventh straight.

Omar Williams scored 10 of his 12 points in the first 10 minutes of the second half, and finished with eight rebounds for the Colonials.

No. 20 Mississippi St. 80, Xavier 74: At Cincinnati, Wisconsin, Frazier emerged from a deep shooting slump by scoring 20 points and No. 20 Mississippi State kept its road streak going by beating Xavier.

The Bulldogs (9-2) won their 14th straight road game, the longest current streak in Division I. Mississippi State shot a season-high 54 percent from the field.

Xavier (2-4) has lost three consecutive home games.

No. 21 Michigan St. 63, Delaware St. 45: At East Lansing, Mich., Chris Hill had 14 points, including four three-pointers, Kelvin Torbert added 12 points and Shannon Brown had 10 for the Spartans (6-2).

No. 25 Cincinnati 81, Northwestern St. 65: At Cincinnati, Jason Maxwell scored 21 points, including 14 in the second half, to lead Cincinnati (7-0), which is ranked for the first time this season.

The game was coach Bob Huggins' 500th at Cincinnati, where he is 381-119.

Travis Hancock scored 12 points and Clifton Lee added 11 to lead Northwestern State (5-5), which lost its third straight after a five-game winning streak.

Spadafora the star as Gettysburg tops Navy

The Associated Press

ANNAPOLIS — Mike Spadafora scored a career-high 26 points to lead Division III Gettysburg College past Division I Navy 75-69 on Saturday.

Navy (3-6) led 52-37 with 11 minutes to play but Gettysburg (3-4) went on a 17-0 run to take the lead on the way to snapping an 11-game losing streak against the Middies dating to Dec. 9, 1992.

Until a one-point victory last season, the Middies had beaten the Bullets by an average of 29 points during that stretch.

The score was 63-63 with 2:35 to play when Spadafora put the Bullets ahead to stay with a free throw.

Spadafora, a transfer from Duquesne, scored 12 of his team's last 14 points including four straight free throws to ice the outcome.

Navy, which made 13 of 14 free throws in the first half, made just five of 13 in the second half.

The Middies also committed 25 turnovers.

Laraine Mergerson led Navy with 16 points and Corey Johnson added 12 points and nine rebounds.

David Hooper added 11 points and George O'Garro 10 for Navy.

Ryan Page, who had 14 points, gave the Bullets a 71-65 lead with a dunk off a steal with 1:07 to play.

Navy led 38-35 at the half after overcoming a 12-3 Gettysburg lead with a 24-7 run for a 27-19 lead with 6:20 to play in the first half.

ESPN says Majerus walks out on USC

BY BETH HARRIS

The Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Three days after being hired as the new basketball coach at Southern California, Rick Majerus backed out of the deal and will stay at ESPN as a college basketball analyst.

Rick expressed to us that he had a change of heart and wondered if the possibility still existed for him to work for ESPN. And it does. We told him he could," USC spokesman Josh Krulowitz said Saturday night.

Majerus, who cited health reasons when he retired in January after 15 seasons as Utah's coach, was announced as the Trojans' incoming coach last Wednesday. He was to assume the post on April 1.

Majerus did not immediately return phone messages Saturday night.

"We plan to meet with Rick on Monday. Until then, there's really nothing we can say," USC athletic director Mike Garrett said in a statement.

USC spokesman Tim Tessalone said the meeting had already been planned.

Until taking over in April, Majerus was supposed to be on the basketball staff and work on recruiting, filling the assistant's job vacated when Jim Saia was promoted to interim coach after Henry Bibby's firing.

During a campus news conference following his hiring, the 56-year-old Majerus said he wasn't worried about his health.

"My health is good or I wouldn't do this," he said. "Both my doctors encouraged me to do it. I wouldn't put anyone, least of all myself, in harm's way."

Saia last saw Majerus over dinner Wednesday night, when they discussed the program's future. Majerus had soup and salad for dinner and kept apples in his hotel room, Saia said.

"He asked a lot of questions about the staff and players coming back. He just wanted to get a feel from me," Saia told The Asso-

ciated Press on Saturday night, his voice still hoarse from USC's victory over Western Michigan earlier in the day.

Something apparently changed overnight Wednesday.

Majerus canceled a Thursday morning meeting with assistant coach Bob Cantu, then canceled dinner that night with assistant Eric Brown, Saia said. On Friday, Majerus canceled a meeting with the players who would still be eligible next season. He talked to the team briefly Wednesday after being introduced as the new coach.

Saia said there were no reasons given for the assorted cancellations.

"He left a message on my cell Friday night saying he wanted to go back to Milwaukee and spend the holidays with his family and mother," Saia said. "He said he'd see me after Christmas."

The Trojans leave for Hawaii on Sunday to play in the Rainbow Classic. They are 2-1 since Saia took over.

"I'll be a team to get away and bond as a team," he said. "I'm an interim coach that maybe has a chance to coach next season. I'd love to stay at USC."

Saia said he's not concerned about the future.

"I can't control what is going to happen," he said. "You could go crazy trying to figure it all out."

USC coach Ben Howland was stunned when informed of Majerus' reversal after the Bruins beat Michigan.

"You're kidding me, right?" Howland said. "I hope and will pray it's not over health issues because that was always the biggest concern. That's surprising to me because I know from listening to him how excited he was to come back."

Majerus coached Utah to the national championship game in 1998, losing to Kentucky, one of the school's 10 NCAA tournament appearances during his tenure. His other college stints were at Boston State and Marquette. He was also an assistant with the NBA's Milwaukee Bucks.



Former Utah coach Rick Majerus, hired last Wednesday to coach USC next season, has indicated that he's changed his mind about the job and is returning to ESPN.



Erroll Knight, left, and Adam Morrison celebrate Gonzaga's 85-73 win over Georgia Tech on Saturday night.

Gonzaga regains its swagger with upset of Ga. Tech

The Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — The Gonzaga Bulldogs showed they belonged on the floor with a top-5 team. That wasn't the case earlier in this young season.

Adam Morrison scored 24 points to lift No. 22 Gonzaga to an 85-73 victory Saturday night over No. 3 Georgia Tech in the Las Vegas Showdown.

In the opener of the double-header, No. 4 Oklahoma State beat UNLV 79-67.

Derek Raivio tied a career high with 21 points on 11-of-18 shooting for Gonzaga (8-1), which earned its biggest victory since beating No. 3 Missouri on Dec. 13, 2003.

During Thanksgiving weekend, Gonzaga faced No. 1 Illinois and was beaten by 17 points in the Wooden Tradition in Indianapolis.

The Bulldogs have turned things around in a hurry.

"We looked like a JV team against Illinois," Gonzaga coach Mark Few said. "So our approach for this game was different. I'm proud of how we came out and played tough. You have to play tough against the great teams and that is what we did."

Will Bynum scored a career-high 28 points, going 9-for-16 from the field and 7-for-8 from the free throw line. But it wasn't enough for the Yellow Jackets (7-1), who lost for the first time since falling to Connecticut in last season's NCAA tournament championship game.

Gonzaga led 45-41 at halftime and then held Georgia Tech scoreless for the first 4:46 of the second half. The Bulldogs twice built leads of 15 points, the second time at 68-53 with 10:28 left.

The Yellow Jackets closed to 75-70 with 3:28 left, but Gonzaga pulled away late.

"We didn't attack their zone well," Georgia Tech coach Paul Hewitt said. "Defensively, we didn't play as well as we are capable of. They had too many chances to drive down the middle of the floor."

Ronny Turiaf had 17 points and 10 rebounds for Gonzaga, and Sean Mallon added 11 points.

B.J. Elder scored 16 points and Jarrett Jack added 15 for Georgia Tech. The Yellow Jackets' reserves outscored Gonzaga's bench players 30-4.

Georgia Tech wasn't helped by the late start time. The tip was after midnight EST; the time zone the Yellow Jackets are used to and traveled from.

"In all fairness to them, this was a hard game," Few said. "It was a 12:30 a.m. start and they had to come across the country."

Gonzaga led 14-8 before Georgia Tech went on a 2-0 run to build its largest lead of the game, 30-23 with 8:41 left in the first half. Gonzaga refused to fold, re-



Oklahoma State's John Lucas drives for the basket against UNLV guard Jerel Blasingame.

sponding with a 9-0 run of its own on the way to taking charge of the game.

No. 4 Oklahoma St. 79, UNLV 67: By halftime, Oklahoma State had taken off the rust from a week-long break for exams. The Cowboys went on a 15-point run to erase an early four-point deficit.

Joey Graham had 20 points and John Lucas added 17 for the Cowboys (8-0) as the Final Four team from a year ago remained undefeated.

"We are better than last year's team," said Graham, who led Oklahoma State with seven rebounds. "We have added so many assets."

UNLV, down by as many as 16 points, halved the deficit to 71-53 with 1:47 to play thanks to five straight points from Romel Beck.

Seconds later, however, Ivan McFarlin's dunk capped a perfectly executed fast break in helping the Cowboys close the game on an 8-4 run.

"We quit sharing the ball. That is not what this team is about," Graham said about letting UNLV back in the game.

McFarlin also had 17 points for the Cowboys, who forced 21 turnovers and held UNLV to 40 percent shooting in their first action since beating Alabama-Birmingham 86-73 eight days earlier.

Beck had 25 points for UNLV (3-4) and Jerel Blasingame added 19 and nine assists.

Graham and McFarlin had seven rebounds apiece as the Cowboys held a 38-33 advantage on the boards.

"We didn't back away in the second half," UNLV coach Lon Kruger said. "We found out that we have to be more physical."

"Oklahoma State is very strong and quick, and we didn't overcome that."

Seasons Greetings, Sgt. Delbert Jensen

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SPORTS



Iverson torches Bucks
for season-high 54 points,
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Vick's vanquishing act



Falcons quarterback Michael Vick dives past Panthers linebacker Dan Morgan into the end zone for the tying touchdown. Atlanta won in overtime. AP

Remarkable TD run allows Falcons to win in OT

BY PAUL NEWBERRY
The Associated Press

ATLANTA — The Atlanta Falcons were down to their final play. They had the right guy for that perilous position.

Michael Vick ran for a 12-yard touchdown on fourth-and-goal with less than 2 minutes left in regulation, literally flying through the air to get the Falcons to overtime. Jay Feely took it from there, kicking a 38-yard field goal for a 34-31 victory over the Carolina Panthers on Saturday night.

Atlanta snapped the Panthers' five-game winning streak, a blow to the revitalized playoff hopes for the defending NFC champions.

In a game of amazing twists and turns, the Falcons (11-3) pulled off the final comeback. As usual, Vick was right in the middle of things.

"I was not frustrated after they took the lead," he said. "It just motivated me to go out there and put points on the board to win."

Carolina (6-8) got back into playoff contention after a 1-7 start, and the Panthers were as resilient as ever in this one, recovering from a pair of double-digit deficits.

"It doesn't surprise me," Falcons defensive end Patrick Kerney said. "Even if we got up by 50, I figured they would fight and scratch and claw for the win."



Falcons kicker Jay Feely (4) celebrates with his teammates after kicking a 38-yard field goal in overtime to beat the Panthers. AP

The Panthers went ahead for the first time with a 21-point fourth quarter, only to have the Falcons show they know a thing or two about bouncing back.

Dez White got the Falcons in position for the tying score with a dazzling 54-yard reception. He caught the ball along the sideline at the Carolina 40, spun around with one hand on the turf and sprinted all the way to the 5.

The Panthers knocked the ball away from Vick, but Michael Jenkins recovered for the Falcons at the 2. A holding penalty knocked Atlanta back, but Vick wasn't done.

Vick spotted an opening up the middle and took off for the end zone, diving across with 1:37 remaining. The officials reviewed the play to see if Vick went down before he crossed the goal line,

but replays showed that he somehow kept his left knee suspended about an inch above the turf as he stretched out for the end zone.

"Everyone else had their backs turned to me, so that is why I was able to make it to the end zone," Vick said. "I was lucky to get in there."

Carolina won the coin toss in overtime, only to have Jake Delhomme overthrow Ricky Proehl down the middle. Aaron Bensley made the interception and returned it 30 yards to the Carolina 23.

A couple of safe runs set up Feely, who connected on third down to put the Falcons on the brink of clinching the No. 2 seed in the NFC.

They wrapped up the NFC South the previous week, just the third division title in franchise history.

The Panthers' remarkable turnaround left them sixth in the NFC — the final playoff spot — coming into the weekend. The defending conference champions are now a half-game behind St. Louis, which plays at Arizona on Sunday.

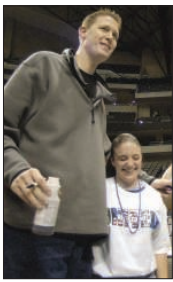
"This team has a lot of heart," coach John Fox said. "They all fought hard. We just came up short."

Vick had an erratic game, going just 11-for-28 for 154 yards with a couple of interceptions. On the flip side, he threw a pair of TD passes and ran eight times for 68 yards.

SEE VICK ON PAGE 28



A's 'Big Three'
down to 1; Mulder
goes to Cards
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Wounded troops
get up close,
personal with Mavs
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Gonzaga still has
some zip, upsets
No. 3 Georgia Tech
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Manning's best game as pro not enough to top Roethlisberger Page 28